

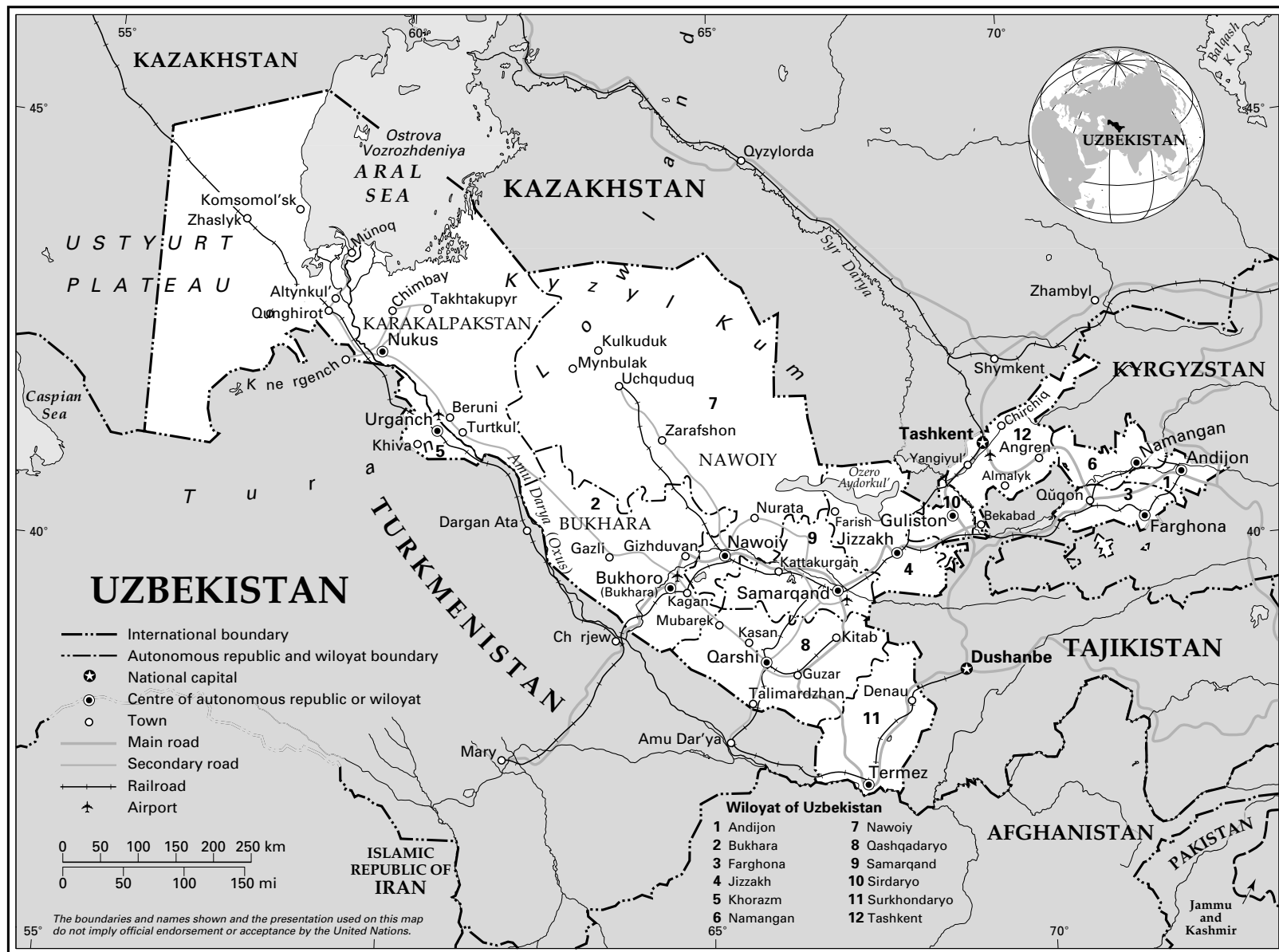
UZBEKISTAN AT TEN: REPRESSION AND INSTABILITY

21 August 2001



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UZBEKISTAN AT TEN: REPRESSION AND INSTABILITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Uzbekistan plays a pivotal role in Central Asia. It is the region's most militarily capable and populous country, and large Uzbek minorities live in neighbouring states. As it approaches the tenth anniversary of its independence, however, internal and external pressures threaten to crack the nation's thin veneer of stability. While the government has been quick to blame outside forces for its woes and indeed to exaggerate the impact of these forces, it is clear that the most important factor driving the mounting instability is Uzbekistan's failure to embrace real political or economic reform.

Evidence continues to mount that Uzbekistan's "unique state-construction model" is falling apart. The last two years have witnessed bombings in the capital, Tashkent (February 1999) and armed incursions by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan (summer 1999 and 2000). However, the growing potential for civil unrest is driven by the twin prongs of severe political repression and economic despair, as protests this year in Tashkent, Andijan and Jizzakh over crop seizures and the detention of political prisoners make clear.

During the early stages of independence, many observers attributed Uzbekistan's relative socio-economic and political stability to President Islam Karimov's authoritarian policies. Despite the country's often abysmal human rights record, and over the protests of human rights

organisations and increasingly repressed opposition groups, most international financial assistance (including security aid) has continued to flow. Ironically, in looking past the Uzbekistan government's frequent abuses out of concerns regarding Islamist radicalism in the region, the international community has inadvertently helped create exactly the conditions that it has always feared the most. Growing political repression and poverty now provide a fertile breeding ground for violence, instability and increasingly active Islamist extremist groups. The authoritarian approach has at best postponed, but not defused, a looming economic and political crisis.

It requires relatively enormous financial, human and other resources for the government of Uzbekistan to maintain authoritarian rule and keep control over competing internal factions based on regionalism, ethnicity, and patronage networks. The establishment of near absolute power by the executive branch has only been achieved through a brutal crackdown on moderate voices and through power-sharing arrangements with leftover Soviet-era bureaucrats in the "power" ministries. Tashkent's authoritarian domestic approach has sparked a political crisis marked by mismanagement, the emergence of a strong Islamist opposition, broad economic dislocation, endemic corruption, growing dissatisfaction with the government, poor relations with neighbours and continuing regional turmoil.

A consolidation of anti-government forces is likely over time and raises concerns about the succession

of power in Uzbekistan whenever Karimov's rule ends. With no meaningful civil society and alternative political figures and groups operating underground in a highly secretive fashion, the potential for a bloody civil conflict in the struggle to replace the current leadership is real. If Uzbekistan implodes in violence, the reverberations will be felt across all of Central Asia, and pose security implications for Europe, China, Russia, the Middle East and the United States. The only way to defuse this unfolding crisis is to strengthen democracy and liberalise Uzbekistan's still highly centralised economy. Since it is obvious the Karimov government will not make any moves toward reform without both substantial internal and external pressure, governments friendly to Uzbekistan need to rethink their current policy approach. The opportunity for avoiding conflict in the region may soon be gone.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF UZBEKISTAN:

1. The government should permit opposition groups, including the Birlik People's Movement and the Erk Democratic Party, to register as political parties.
2. The government should allow human rights groups such as the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan and the Independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan to register officially as non-governmental organisations and should direct the security services to stop intimidating their staff.
3. More resources should be channelled directly into improving national living standards, rather than enlarging the already considerable role of regional police and military forces.
4. The constitutional right to practice religion in private and public, freely and without interference, should be upheld. The government should implement the constitutional separation of state and religion and end its practice of designating state-sponsored Islamic leaders.

5. The separation and equality of the executive, judiciary and legislative branches declared by the Constitution should be upheld.
6. The government should combat unlawful practices by security agencies, such as the harassment of journalists and human rights activists.
7. The government should cease antagonising ethnic minorities, ending for example, deportation of ethnic Tajiks from the Uzbek-Tajik border area in the Surkhan-Darya Province that does not improve the security situation and only serves to increase tensions.

TO THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

8. The international community, in particular the United States, the European Union nations and Japan, must be more discriminating in their response to the problem of Islamist extremism, recognising that unquestioning support for secular dictatorships only antagonises Central Asian Muslim communities, thus encouraging extremism and an anti-Western orientation.
9. Government donors to Uzbekistan should make it clear that their assistance will be predicated on political liberalisation, including such measures as registering opposition parties and human rights organisations to encourage the establishment of a legitimate political opposition and an unhindered civil society.
10. The U.S. government, in keeping with the terms of the Cooperative Threat program and the Leahy Amendment to the Foreign Operations Assistance Act, should withhold security assistance until Uzbekistan's human rights record, including performance of the security services, improves significantly, and, in keeping with the International Religious Freedom Act, should condition the future of the U.S.-Uzbekistan Joint Commission on Uzbekistan's efforts to combat human rights abuses based on the religious convictions of its citizens.
11. The United States, the EU and Japan should demand an investigation into the case of the head of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan's Qashqa-Darya Province office,

Shovriq Ruzimorodov, who was detained by police and died while in custody.

12. The international financial institutions should condition their aid on the Uzbek government making considerable progress in opening the economy, developing the rule of law and fostering democracy.

Osh/Brussels, 21 August 2001



UZBEKISTAN AT TEN: REPRESSION AND INSTABILITY

I. INTRODUCTION

In a decade of independence, Uzbekistan has gained a reputation as one of the most authoritarian states in Central Asia. The government of President Islam Karimov has based its legitimacy on the promise that it will keep order and make the country a “great” one with a dominant regional role. Some Western observers have argued that Uzbekistan’s status as a strong state is worth supporting for the sake of the stability of the region.¹ Yet as some of the strong political undercurrents have come to the surface in the past several years, the country reveals itself to be by no means so monolithic or stable. Most prominent have been the emergence of a small but militant Islamist opposition, which has conducted military operations for two years aimed at toppling Uzbekistan’s government, and a much larger, so far peaceful, underground opposition within Uzbekistan.²

Potentially even more destabilising are the rifts within Uzbekistan’s ruling elite itself. There is a danger that formerly influential political elites, who have become marginalised as President Karimov has consolidated his position, could lose

patience with the concept of stability before all else as they watch their influence and resources ebb. There is potential for alliances among disenchanted groups such as the rural poor, who give more to the government and get less from it than they did during Soviet times; the Muslim believers, who are increasingly persecuted; the would-be entrepreneurs, who face a stagnating economy and exclusion from the most profitable sectors; and the regional leaderships, who are denied the autonomy needed to maintain the well-being of their regions. Even a strong hand cannot keep all of these forces in check indefinitely.

As Central Asia’s most populous state³ and its strongest military power,⁴ Uzbekistan has an important strategic role for the whole region. However, without a change in policies by the government and the international community, Uzbekistan will remain under a cloud of potential violence. Russia, China and most of Eurasia have much to lose if the situation in Uzbekistan continues to erode.

In Uzbekistan, like many of the Central Asian republics, the political leadership that emerged after independence was largely the old elite

¹ The most prominent proponent of this view is Frederick Starr; see: “Making Eurasia stable,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 1, 1996, pp. 80-92.

² On the rise of Islamism in Central Asia and especially in Uzbekistan, see: *Central Asia: Islamist Mobilisation and Regional Security*, ICG Asia Report, No. 14, 1 March 2001. All ICG reports are available at: <http://www.crisisweb.org>.

³ According to the UNDP’s *Uzbekistan: Human Development Report 2000*, the population of Uzbekistan is 24.5 million. That is half of Central Asia’s total population. See UNDP Uzbekistan, *Uzbekistan: Human Development Report, 2000* (Tashkent: Centre for Economic Research, 2000), available at: <http://www.cer.uz/NHDR/2000/2000-e.htm>.

⁴ For more details on military capabilities of Central Asian states see *Central Asia: Fault Lines in the New Security Map*, ICG Asia Report, No. 20, 4 July 2001.

operating under a new name. President Karimov quickly used his new autonomy to establish full control over executive, legislative and judicial power. The political, economic and social transition that accompanied the Soviet Union's dissolution also shifted notions of religious, regional, ethnic and social identity across Central Asia. Since independence, Uzbekistan has been challenged both by unresolved historical tensions and new political and economic problems. As it approaches the tenth anniversary of its independence on 1 September 2001,⁵ only a small window appears open for Uzbekistan's leaders, and the international community, to establish genuine stability underpinned by democracy and a market economy.

The continuing efforts of the Karimov government to eliminate internal opposition have undercut democratic alternatives in Uzbekistan while fuelling the emergence of a hostile military organisation, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Most Uzbekistanis find themselves more beleaguered than a decade ago and caught between the state security apparatus and increasingly radicalised Islamic opposition forces. According to Tolib Yakubov, the General Secretary of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, "the government of President Karimov has created a 'huge machine' which fields 40,000 security police in Tashkent alone, and recruits as many as 2,500 informers per month nation-wide."⁶ Extra-legal detentions and human rights abuses have become the norm. The government spends increasing amounts on the security services and correspondingly less on the basic needs of the people.

This escalation of repression combined with impoverishment has stirred up opposition to the Uzbek elite. In a society with a rising population, a stagnating economy, deeply rooted corruption, a hobbled political opposition and a legacy of regional divisions and patronage networks, discontent is surging. These pressures have combined with turmoil in nearby Tajikistan and

Afghanistan to provoke often counterproductive responses from Uzbekistan's leadership.

In Uzbekistan religion is now also an increasingly an important factor in political development. Unfortunately, instead of providing the framework of a legitimate civil society to accommodate these expressions of popular will peacefully, the government has forced most Islamic activity underground. Suppression of Muslim groups has in some cases shifted their focus from Islamic observance to political activism and even militancy. Given the prospect that most of Uzbekistanis will continue to benefit little from economic and political reforms, the ranks of those willing to take violent action against the government are likely to grow.

A reversal of current authoritarian policies is urgently required. While there should be no mechanical application of Western models of democracy, appropriate forms of transparency and accountability and mechanisms for popular participation must be adopted. The interests of the general population — especially the poorest, the youth, the religiously devout, and those most excluded from power and who are the most prone to support radicalism — must be at the forefront of policy. To enable this, these groups must have their voices heard through uncensored media and the right of association and be allowed to form groups representing their political interests. The country must move away from Soviet instincts and practices which entrusted power to a narrow elite and dealt with divergent views and interests through a repressive security apparatus.

Since independence, the government of Uzbekistan has argued, at times convincingly, that some degree of authoritarianism has enabled the country to develop its economy and avoid descent into political chaos. However, the negative consequences of this authoritarianism are growing increasingly evident, if not yet to policy makers in Tashkent.

The international community must recognise that it is not in its interests to offer substantial and unconditional support to this kind of government. The relevant comparisons include Indonesia and Iran, where Western-friendly authoritarianism led to instability and ultimately grave consequences for both the countries and the international community. Some Western policy makers reason

⁵ Although it declared independence on 31 August 1991, Uzbekistan marks Independence Day on 1 September.

⁶ "Uzbek government seen as increasingly repressive," *RFE/RL Press release*, 29 May 2001, available online at: <http://www.rferl.org/welcome/english/releases/2001/03/30-300301.html>. The population of Tashkent city is slightly more than two million.

that keeping a tight lid on the potential unrest and Islamist extremism is the paramount priority, and they therefore support the strengthening of the security apparatus.

Political circles in Uzbekistan encompass a wide spectrum of views. There are many — perhaps including President Karimov himself — who recognise that authoritarianism represents a dangerous path. Anyone wishing to pursue a better alternative, however, must contend with tensions in the country and colossal vested interests that block reform. It is clear that the engagement of the international community is critical if Uzbekistan is to take a different path. If the government and the international community do not take appropriate steps now, they may well soon face worsening extremism and conflict.

II. UZBEKISTAN'S FRACTURED POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The Republic of Uzbekistan was created as a political entity by the Bolshevik government in Moscow during the 1924 “national delimitation” that divided Central Asia into ethnically based administrative units. Uzbekistan became the Soviet Union’s fifth largest republic with its largest Muslim community. Uzbekistan declared its independence on 31 August 1991, four months before the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Following independence, there was a period of social turbulence. The Communist Party’s monopoly on power had been broken, and opposition political parties and other activist groups had already begun to emerge during the Gorbachev period of glasnost and perestroika reforms.. There was widespread hope that independence would lead to greater political pluralism. Islam Karimov came to power in 1989 as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan. He supported distancing Tashkent from Moscow, and under his leadership, the Communist Party of Uzbekistan adopted some of the prominent issues in the cultural nationalist program such as establishing Uzbek as the state language, lifting restrictions on Islam, and reviving the national heritage, which were championed by the emerging independent secular political parties.⁷

Karimov became the first president of independent Uzbekistan in the elections of December 1991 — the first, and so far only seriously contested balloting for the top position in the country. Apart from the government’s efforts to prevent key opponents from participating, and its substantial efforts to create an uneven playing field, the elections were relatively free and fair.⁸ By 1992, however, President Karimov began to adopt more authoritarian measures to consolidate his power over the country, launching attacks against independent political parties, the free press and

⁷ See: William Fierman, “The Communist Party, ‘Erk’ and the changing Uzbek political environment,” *Central Asian Survey* (London), Vol. 10, No. 3, pp. 55-72.

⁸ Bess Brown, “Presidential election in Uzbekistan,” *Radio Liberty Research Report*, 24 January 1992.

religious figures.⁹ That process of reasserting monopolistic control of power, heavily reliant on the security services, has continued to this day.

President Karimov has embraced a succession of different state models for the development of Uzbekistan. Initially, Turkey attracted his attention because of the secular nature of its state and political system. This appeared to signal a commitment to democratic development, if under the leadership of a strong authoritarian leader such as Atatürk. Subsequently, there was a reorientation toward models which did not call for rapid progress toward a competitive party system. South Korea offered an example of a country where successful, state-driven economic reforms came first, and real progress toward pluralist democracy came only much later. More recently, the Chinese model has received more attention, according to which there is economic reform and prosperity but little political reform.

In fact, none of these models have been implemented more than rhetorically. Ultimately the leadership of Uzbekistan adopted an ideology whereby the country would pursue its “own path to prosperity.”¹⁰ The promise of a “great future”¹¹ for the nation has substituted for specific reforms. Where neighbouring Central Asian governments have based their claim to legitimacy on economic and political reforms, Karimov has often pointed to those reforms as the cause of economic hardships and political disorder they have experienced. To satisfy international criticisms, the government adopted, for example, a law on NGOs in April 1999,¹² but at the same time maintained repressive conditions which make it exceedingly difficult for

the NGO sector and civil society generally to develop. In looking at the impact of Karimov’s policies on Uzbekistan’s political environment, three areas deserve particular attention: the highly marginalised position of the secular democratic opposition; the use of official parties by the government to validate and implement a tight monopoly on power; and the evolving role of Uzbekistan’s Islamist opposition.

A. SECULAR DEMOCRATIC OPPOSITION

In the late 1980s, under pressure from forces within and outside the Communist Party, especially in the Baltic republics, Gorbachev implemented reforms which eventually allowed opposition political groups to achieve official recognition. There was considerably greater official resistance to such reforms in Uzbekistan and most other Central Asian countries than in other parts of the Soviet Union, both because the Communists in Uzbekistan were less reform-minded and because the Kremlin was more nervous about giving political freedoms to its Muslim population. Yet the still unified Communist Party of the USSR and its branch in Uzbekistan were obliged to implement more-or-less consistent policies throughout the Soviet Union, leading to the emergence of a democratic opposition in Uzbekistan in 1988.

The first formal opposition group, the *Birlik* [“Unity”] Popular Movement, was founded the following year.¹³ Its program espoused democratic and nationalist goals including a renaissance of Uzbek culture, multiparty democracy and greater independence from Moscow.¹⁴ The *Birlik* movement and its successor, the *Birlik* Party (also known as the Democratic Party of Uzbekistan), demanded liberal reforms, respect for personal freedoms, establishment of Uzbek as the official language, and measures to address ecological and health problems. The movement soon numbered its supporters in the tens of thousands.

As the leadership of the Uzbek Republic asserted greater autonomy from Moscow, opposition

⁹ See: Cassandra Cavannaugh, “Crackdown on the opposition in Uzbekistan,” *Radio Liberty Research Report*, 31 July 1992.

¹⁰ President Karimov in his book *Ideia natsional’noi nezavisimosti: osnovnye poniatia i printsipy* [The idea of national independence: basic definitions and principles] argues that Uzbekistan’s model of state and social construction is recognised by international community as an “Uzbek model” (Tashkent: Uzbekiston Publishing House, 2001, p. 5).

¹¹ See Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan — gosudarstvo s velikim budushchem* [Uzbekistan — a state with great future] (Tashkent: Uzbekiston Publishing House, 1992).

¹² “New law in Uzbekistan: law on non-governmental, non-commercial organizations”, the *International Journal of Not-for-Profit Law*, Vol. 2, No. 2, available at: http://www.icnl.org/journal/vol2iss2/cr_nis.htm

¹³ The *Birlik* Popular Movement of Uzbekistan’s official website is found at: <http://www.birlik.net>.

¹⁴ Mehrdad Haghighi, *Islam and politics in Central Asia* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1995), pp. 123-125.

politicians found they were subjected to increasing restrictions. During the February 1990 parliamentary elections, for example, the government was able to block the leaders of Birlik from participation. Ten seats were won by less prominent figures with some commitment to the Birlik program and party.¹⁵ However, in the fall of 1989 leading up to the elections, the Birlik leadership had itself fractured over tactics. This culminated in a formal split in February 1990, and the creation of two major parties: Birlik and Erk.¹⁶ The position of Birlik Chairman was filled by Abdurahim Pólat, a computer scientist who headed the laboratory at the Cybernetics Research Institute of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences.¹⁷

The *Erk* ["Freedom"] movement was formally established in April 1990, under the leadership of the poet and writer Salay Madaminov — known by his pseudonym Muhammad Salih — who had been a core member of Birlik. The Erk movement was eventually re-designated as the Erk Democratic Party and officially registered on 5 September 1991.¹⁸ Then the Secretary of the Writers Union of Uzbekistan and a parliamentary deputy since February 1990, Salih gained some support from Uzbek intellectuals. Former members of Erk, accounting for the split, recall that Muhammad Salih disagreed with other senior members of Birlik who favoured more radical methods. Salih argued for pursuit of reform largely through the existing political process. Critics of the Erk leadership attribute the disintegration of the Birlik movement to Salih's loyalty to the government.

Although the Uzbek government adopted some ideas from Birlik's program after independence, differences over approaches to economic and political reforms soon led to conflict with the now divided opposition. Birlik, which was viewed as more hostile to the government, was denied the right to nominate its leader, Abdurahim Pólat as a candidate during the presidential election in 1991. Salih's position was more that of an insider, as a member of parliament, and at this stage, the Erk

party remained committed to reform of the political system from within. Salih and others in the Erk leadership pressed ideas for rapid economic liberalisation and private land ownership. The new political organisation received a degree of public support, and Salih was allowed to run in the presidential elections in December 1991. According to the official results, Islam Karimov won overwhelmingly while Salih received only 12.6%, mainly from his home province of Kharazm.

The strained relations between authorities and opposition parties deteriorated further as Birlik stepped up its "non-parliamentary struggle"¹⁹ by staging protests and demonstrations objecting to the authoritarian orientation of newly elected President Karimov. Birlik was then denied legal status as a political party, even though by January 1992 it had gathered 3,500 signatures — more than the 3,000 required by law for registration of a political association or party.²⁰ On 29 June 1992, Pólat was assaulted and severely beaten by unidentified men near the Prosecutor's office where he had been called for questioning. In the summer of 1992, he emigrated to Turkey and in February 1998 he moved to the United States.²¹

With a divided opposition, the former Communist leadership was able to dissipate and resist the pressure for reform. Neither Birlik nor Erk were nearly as effective in bringing pressure to bear on Karimov as separate movements as they were when unified. Birlik veterans interviewed by ICG blamed Erk's leadership for the break-up of the Birlik movement. Said one activist, "The President offered some active members of the movement his support if they organised a party functioning 'constructively', through the parliament. Some intellectuals led by Salih trusted him and made a mistake the cost of which we are still paying."

¹⁵ Birlik leadership sources.

¹⁶ Erk Democratic Party of Uzbekistan's official website is found at: <http://www.uzbekistanerk.org>.

¹⁷ At the Second Qurultay [council] on 11-12 November 1989, Birlik decided to have several "Raisdoshlar" — Co-chairmen with equal rights.

¹⁸ See the historical background of Erk, available at the official website at: <http://www.uzbekistanerk.org>.

¹⁹ The government argued that the opposition should fight for its objectives through its representatives in the parliament and not through demonstrations, meetings and protests.

²⁰ ICG's correspondence with Abdumannob Pólat, early July 2001.

²¹ See the page entitled "'Birlik'ning tarixi [History of 'Birlik']" on the Birlik website for more details of the history of the movement up to 1994, available at: <http://www.birlik.net/tarix.net>.

Even with the opposition divided, the government stepped up its efforts to suppress the Erk party. According to former Erk party members, though their candidate lost the election, the government saw the growing opposition in Uzbekistan as a real challenge. A former editor of a regional party newspaper noted, “Concerns that in the future the government would be unable to preserve power forced the regime to start a broad campaign to suppress opposition.” Thus, Erk’s newspaper was shut down, active members of the party were fired from their jobs, and some were imprisoned.

In April 1993 Muhammad Salih was arrested, but then released under pressure from the international community. Erk’s leadership was further weakened by the arrests of Party Secretary Atanazar Aripov, newspaper chief editor Ibrahim Haqqul and other members of the executive committee. As a result, Erk was forced to go underground. Muhammad Salih himself, went into exile in Turkey in 1993 and moved to Norway in 1999. In 1993 all political parties and NGOs had to re-register, and the government refused Birlik and Erk any legal status. By the middle of 1993, all opposition political groups have been banned, and their leaders were in exile or prison.

In step with its elimination of opposition parties, the government also moved against Uzbekistan’s independent media. Publications of the Birlik movement, the Erk party and other free mass information outlets were banned, as was the distribution of unofficial literature. The government imposed severe restrictions on foreign newspapers and significantly reduced re-transmission of Russian TV broadcasts, which occasionally carried reports not consistent with the official position of the Uzbekistan government. The Uzbekistan editions of Russian newspapers were edited to delete comments unfavourable to the regime. Despite a constitutional provision against censorship, the Committee for the Control of State Secrets enforced these encroachments on media freedom.²² In a span of roughly two years, President Karimov effectively divided, suppressed and banned his political opposition, while consolidating his own position within a power structure that had adopted the authoritarian tactics of its Soviet predecessor.

Faced with a constitutional limitation of two presidential terms, Karimov in March 1995 sought and obtained the cancellation of presidential elections scheduled for 1996. By a Soviet-style referendum, he extended his term without elections until 2000 — according to the official results, with opposition from only 0.2 per cent of the 99.6 per cent of the electorate that voted.²³ The next several years were politically uneventful, though there were periodic reminders that tensions lay beneath the surface. In the last months of 1997, for example, a number of police officials were killed. The murders were officially attributed to Islamist extremists, though some independent observers consider them more likely to have been the fall-out of power struggles among the ruling elite and figures in the highly developed shadow economy.

In February 1999, there was a series of car bomb explosions in Tashkent, one of which came close to President Karimov himself and destroyed one of the most prominent government buildings. Though the government proclaimed within hours that it knew who was behind that incident, the circumstances behind the bombings remain murky. Most independent observers consider it likeliest that the bombings were initiated by figures within the power structure, though possibly implemented by members of an underground movement. The rationale for the “insider” theory is that there are powerful forces in the country which are not content with Karimov’s domination of the government. Whether or not the bombings were the work of opposition or insiders, they were followed by a further hardening of the government’s position toward opposition, both Islamist and secular. Muhammad Salih was accused of organising the bombings in collaboration with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and was sentenced in absentia to fifteen years in prison. Prosecutors presented no compelling evidence that the Erk leadership was involved, though some believe there are grounds for such allegations.²⁴ Three brothers of the Erk

²² Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Chapter XV: Mass Media, Article 67: Censorship is not allowed.

²³ CSCE, “*Political Reform and Human Rights in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan*” (Washington, DC: Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe of the U.S. Congress, March 1998).

²⁴ Abdumannob Polat and Nickolai Butkevich, “Unravelling the mystery of the Tashkent bombings: theories and implications,” available at the website of

leader were imprisoned for alleged anti-state activities and cooperation with “terrorists”.²⁵

These actions may be part of a wider effort by the Uzbek government to discredit secular democratic opposition figures and thus to prevent Salih and other opposition leaders from gaining popularity if they are ever allowed to return to Tashkent from exile. The country’s security services are actively working to eliminate the impact of the opposition — possibly even to eliminate it physically. An exiled writer in correspondence with ICG noted that the Uzbek government has worked hard to turn Muhammad Salih into a criminal as part of an “anti-Salih campaign”. He argued that fear of Salih led Karimov to pressure Turkey to extradite the opposition leader to Uzbekistan.²⁶ Instead, Turkey pressured Salih to leave Turkey, but did not extradite him.²⁷ Salih eventually moved to Norway, where there was an alleged plot to kill him by the National Security Service, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Uzbek branch of Interpol.²⁸

On 9 January 2000, President Karimov won re-election with 92 per cent of the vote against token opposition. The election was widely judged as failing to meet basic democratic standards. Perhaps the best insight into the state of democracy in Uzbekistan today is provided by Professor Abdulhafiz Jalalov, the only “alternative” presidential candidate, who acknowledged that he

himself voted for Karimov in the interests of, “stability, peace, our nation’s independence, [and] the development of Uzbekistan.”²⁹

Birlik currently has a central committee, with some members in exile and several in Uzbekistan, but the party hardly functions and has very few supporters inside the country. Still, if allowed to operate unhindered, it could present a challenge to the government. Its main goal at this stage is to make the international community aware of the political situation in the country, promote human rights organisations in Uzbekistan, and advance the ideological and political position of the party among Western policy-makers in an effort to pressure the Uzbek government. Birlik works closely with the Washington-based Central Asian Human Rights Information Network led by Abdumannob Pólat, the brother of Birlik’s chairman, and also a member of the party. Many Birlik activists lead provincial and city branches of the Tashkent-based Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (HRSU),³⁰ chaired by Abdumannob Pólat and General Secretary Tolib Yakubov. For example, Muzafarmirza Ishakov, the chairman of Andijan Province’s branch, and Ahmad Abdullaev, the chairman of HRSU Namangan Province branch, are long-term activists of both organisations.

In May, the branch of Birlik in the city of Qoqand (Ferghana Province) asked authorities to allow the movement to hold a Qurultay [council], but Prosecutor Sultanov threatened to imprison the members for holding an illegal gathering if the group persisted. A journalist from Namangan informed ICG that the Namangan and other regional branches also attempted to organise meetings of activists but were rebuffed by local authorities. He said Birlik activists are seeking to legalise the party and start its activities on a national level next year if the government softens its stance toward opposition.³¹

Since the early 1990s, when Muhammad Salih led Erk to break away from Birlik, relations between

International Eurasian Institute for Economic and Political Research: http://iicas.org/english/Krsten_4_12_00.htm.

²⁵ The arrest and conviction of Salih’s brothers is consistent with the common practice by the law enforcement authorities in Uzbekistan — like the Soviet regime before it — to harass and punish relatives of individuals whom they are targeting.

²⁶ Correspondence with ICG, early July 2001. The person wished to remain unidentified as he has close relatives in Uzbekistan.

²⁷ By contrast, another exiled opposition leader, Abdurahim Pólat, left Turkey for the United States a year earlier, apparently not under pressure from the Turkish government.

²⁸ For more about this assassination attempt, see also the text of the interview of Tengiz Gudava, editor of the Caucasus and Central Asia Program of Radio Liberty, with Muhammad Salih (in Russian), available at: <http://www.svoboda.org/programs/RTL/2001/RTL.051501.shtml>. This assassination attempt was also described on the program, “Our version: stamped ‘secret’,” aired on the Russian TV channel “TV-Centre” on 27 May 2001.

²⁹ CSCE, “Human Rights and Democratisation in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan,” March 2000.

³⁰ The official website of HRSU is available at: <http://home.collegeclub.com/centralasia/welcome.html>.

³¹ ICG interview with the Radio Liberty Uzbek Service correspondent for Ferghana Valley Nosir Zokir, Namangan, 3 July 2001.

the two opposition groups have been tense. Both suspect the other of making deals with the Karimov government. Personal rivalries and recriminations are rife and have only furthered the Uzbek government's efforts to keep its opponents weak and divided. The inability of both movements to mobilise their resources to put pressure on Karimov's regime is also reflected in the long-standing disagreements and infighting between their respective human rights organisations within Uzbekistan,³² the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (linked to Birlik) and the Independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan (affiliated with Erk).

At present, the secular opposition in Uzbekistan appears to have been successfully suppressed and divided and not to represent a serious threat to the government. Now functioning in exile, the secular democratic opposition has largely lost its connection with the public, and only a very limited segment of the population has any knowledge of its programs and views. Generally, the belief that democracy equates with anarchy is widely accepted, thanks to successful efforts by the government to convince the public that giving free rein to democrats led to the civil war in Tajikistan and was responsible for the riots in Uzbekistan in the late 1980s. The opposition movements themselves have also failed to develop coherent and compelling political programs. Due to a loss of confidence in the secular democratic forces and partially due to traditional loyalty to authorities, most of the population would remain hesitant to join Erk or Birlik even if they were allowed to function in Uzbekistan at this juncture.

The early years of independence were characterised by the euphoria of a new sense national sovereignty and a cultural renaissance. Since that time, a much harsher reality has set in, and people are now more concerned with their social and economic conditions than the search for political orientation. Most members of opposition parties were students, scholars and other intelligentsia. Rural citizens generally have more conservative views and are inclined to uphold the status quo. Over the last few years, as a result of

the increasing atmosphere of authoritarianism and declining living conditions, however, a significant segment of society has become radicalised and more people, especially in rural regions, are likely to support Islamist ideas than democratic ones. In short, the government's policies have effectively neutralised peaceful democratic opposition while creating fertile ground for more violent and extremist assaults on the regime.

B. OFFICIAL PARTIES

In order to fend off the criticism that political opposition has been suppressed, the government has created quasi-independent parties. These in no way constitute real political pluralism and are not an effective means for the population to mobilise in the pursuit of their real interests. They lack popular support and have little credibility among the public at large. The official parties have almost no influence on social life and political development; though several have significant representation in parliament, all operate in lock-step with the government's program. Meanwhile, there is no legal scope for the parties that have the real potential to mobilise society: the banned secular democratic opposition (to a lesser extent), and Islamist underground organisations (to a greater extent).

Even the official newspaper of the Uzbekistani Parliament, *Narodnoe slovo*, acknowledged that political parties, and especially their regional branches, have no noticeable influence on the political life of the country. According to the newspaper most citizens have no understanding of the objectives of parties.³³ Even the parliament (*Oliy Majlis*), filled as it is with representatives of parties which all firmly support President Karimov, has little role to play, since the executive branch has maintained full power in its own hands, as the president's sweeping prerogatives make clear. The constitution grants the president the right to appoint the prime minister, the first deputy prime minister, cabinet ministers, the prosecutor-general and his/her deputies. The president recommends candidates for chairman and members of the Constitutional Court, appoints and dismisses

³² For example, the February 2001 article of Mikhail Ardzinov, chairman of International Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, "Information against Disinformation," accuses the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan of providing false information.

³³ T. Shamakov, "Aktivnee uchastvovat' v obshchestvennoi zhizni [More actively participate in the life of the society]," *Narodnoe slovo* (Tashkent), 26 May 2001, p. 1.

provincial, city and district judges, provincial governors and city mayors and has numerous other privileges to exert authority.³⁴ And though the parliament should approve presidential appointees in some cases, the executive has such a strong influence that it serves largely as a rubber stamp.

Several times every year, 250 deputies with few qualifications other than their loyalty to President Karimov meet for three to four days to, as the U.S. State Department describes it, “confirm laws and other decisions drafted by the executive branch rather than to initiate legislation.”³⁵ In assessing popular participation in the parliamentary election process, the 2000 UNDP Human Development Report noted: “Citizens have the right to elect, but cannot fulfil their right to be elected. In the structure of the *Oliy Majlis*, almost half of the deputies — 122 people — are nominated by local representative bodies and the rest — 128 people — are nominated by parties and elected under party lists.”³⁶

The most prominent official political party continues to be the People’s Democratic Party of Uzbekistan, or PDPU (*Ózbekistan Khalq Demokratik Partiyasi*) — the former Communist Party of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. The party maintained support for the Soviet Union until its last days and only after the August 1991 anti-Gorbachev putsch in Moscow failed, embraced Uzbekistan’s independence. Beyond a name change, the party is little reformed in administrative structure, strategy and membership. Party bosses still held power in the government and continued the same methods of management after independence. The People’s Democratic Party, with more than 350,000 members in 1991,³⁷ simply subsumed the assets of the Communist Party and became the instrument of political support for the new self-appointed government.

Until 1996, Karimov remained First Secretary of the PDPU. When he stepped down, the party continued to support him closely.

There are only faint echoes of the Communist Party’s former commitment to provision of social services. Pensions have lost most of their value, and the government has ceased to look after such social needs as the health care system as they did during Soviet times. The commitment to caring for the population is referred to most often in regard to the need to resist economic reforms which could disrupt social well-being. Genuine supporters of communist ideology have failed to organise as a significant force in Uzbekistan, and they have not enjoyed any groundswell of public support, as they have in some neighbouring states. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the Communist Party plays a role similar to that of its counterpart in Russia, capitalising on nostalgia for Soviet times among those who have experienced declining living standards following the collapse of the USSR. The Uzbek government has also strongly opposed the revival of communism, which is ideologically identified with Russian domination and the suppression of Uzbek national culture.³⁸

Most communists shifted to the People’s Democratic Party of Uzbekistan when Karimov founded it. Their motivations were undoubtedly to maintain their position in the system of power, as opposed to any ideological reorientation. Although the party still has the largest membership, it has lost its influence on political and social life as more and more powers have been directly vested in President Karimov. The People’s Democratic Party currently has the largest representation among political parties, holding 48, or 19 per cent of the 250 seats in parliament.³⁹

³⁴ *The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan*, Chapter XIX: The President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Article 93.

³⁵ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour, “*Uzbekistan: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2000*” (Washington, DC, February 2001).

³⁶ *Uzbekistan: Human Development Report, 1999* (Tashkent: Centre for Economic Research, 2000), p. 46.

³⁷ Resul Yalcin, “A history of [the] multi-party system in Uzbekistan,” Unpublished paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Central Eurasian Studies Society, Madison, Wisconsin, 28 Sept.-1 Oct. 2000 (cited by permission).

³⁸ Unlike in some neighbouring countries where the attitude to past Soviet domination is sufficiently relaxed that, for example, statues of Lenin still abound in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the government in Uzbekistan has dictated that, for example, all references to the “Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic” should be stricken, even from historical texts.

³⁹ OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, “*Republic of Uzbekistan: Election of Deputies to the Oliy Majlis (Parliament), 5 & 19 December 1999: Final Report*” (Warsaw, 28 April 2000), available at: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/election/uzb00-1-final.htm>, p. 14.

Another party, *Vatan Taraqqiyati Partiyasi* ["Homeland Progress Party"], was organised in 1992 by a former *Birlik* activist, the poet Usman Azim. *Vatan Taraqqiyati* has advocated strengthening democratic civil society and a gradual transition to a market-oriented economy. The party mainly attracted intellectuals who left the opposition and accepted the president's call to cooperate with the government. In the 1999 election, they received 20 seats or 8 per cent.

After the March 1995 referendum, which ensured the extension of his presidency for at least another five years, President Karimov saw to the creation a number of political parties which would provide a fig leaf in the face of international criticisms of Uzbekistan's authoritarian political system. Two new parties were given official recognition together with one movement, all of which were more pro-government than pluralist in their political role: the *Adolat* ["Justice"] Social Democratic Party, the *Milliy Tiklanish Demokratik Partiyasi* ["National Rebirth Democratic Party"], and the *Khalq Birligi* Movement.⁴⁰ It is most likely not a coincidence that in these parties' names, two of the key names of earlier opposition movements appear — *Adolat* and *Birlik* — presumably an effort to displace the memory of the now outlawed movements. Yet another party, *Fidokorlar Milliy Demokratik Partiyasi* ["Self-sacrifice National Democratic Party"], was established in January 1999 and attained 34 parliamentary seats (14 per cent) in the December 1999 elections. This became the party most closely associated with Karimov, whom it nominated in the 2000 presidential elections.

The *Adolat* Social Democratic Party emerged in 1995 amid some expectation that it would play an opposition role. Its leader, Shukrulla Mirsaidov, had been Vice-President of Uzbekistan until 1992 when he had a run-in with the President. Not only was he forced to resign, but his position was

eliminated. By 1996, meanwhile, Mirsaidov was under severe pressure from the government, and a long-standing eviction order — requiring not only him but his sons to leave their homes — was enforced. Mirsaidov himself had continued to play an oppositional role, leading the "Democratic Opposition Coordination Council" (since 1992), which was aimed at promoting unity among the opposition, but ultimately was quite ineffectual and had more the effect of giving the false appearance of a pluralist political system. Ultimately, Mirsaidov withdrew from politics in 1998, declaring that uniting the opposition was impossible, given the infighting among them.

The *Adolat* party which Mirsaidov originally led has now been substituted (or continued) by a party with the same name, but with no oppositional pretensions. This party, now led by Turghunpólat Daminov, fielded candidates in the 1999 parliamentary elections, but it was difficult to find differences between its program and the policies put forward by Karimov.⁴¹

In April 2000, the *Fidokorlar* National Democratic Party and *Vatan Taraqqiyati* Party merged. The united party kept the name *Fidokorlar* National Democratic Party. A member of the editorial team of the party's newspaper, *Fidokor*, informed ICG that the new party has more than 65,000 members and 54 parliamentary deputies, making it the second largest faction in the *Oliy Majlis*.⁴²

In 1996 the government introduced a new, more restrictive law governing political parties, which was approved by the parliament in January 1997. This law banned parties organised along the lines of ethnic or religious affiliation and enforced stricter registration requirements. Such laws may ultimately be of little significance, however, if the government continues to refuse to register parties and movements which it does not like even if they adhere to all the formal requirements. In this climate of quasi-pluralism, the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) sent a small group

⁴⁰ To put forward candidates for election a group must be as a registered "party", whereas groups classified as "movements" may not. The *Khalq Birligi* movement was formed on 27 May 1995 to "fully reveal the potential of intellectuals and all social groups of various nationalities living in Uzbekistan; to educate the country's young generation in the spirit of patriotism and deep sense of fatherland. The main objective of the movement is uniting the people for construction of a democratic, legal and just civil society." (From the program of the movement.)

⁴¹ See: Bruce Pannier, "Uzbekistan: government allows trappings of multiparty democracy," *RFE/RL Magazine*, 4 August 1999, available at: <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/1999/08/F.RU.990804134912.html>.

⁴² Tashkent, 23 May 2001.

of experts to assess the 1999 parliamentary elections. However, it declined to send observers to the January 2000 presidential elections because it was apparent in the run-up that the process was deeply flawed.⁴³ The reaction of the Uzbek president to OSCE's criticisms was that "the OSCE focuses only on establishment of democracy, the protection of human rights and the freedom of press. I am now questioning these values."⁴⁴

In the spring 2000 parliamentary session, the government introduced a plan to make the existing unicameral parliament system bicameral. The new parliamentary structure would entail a lower chamber, formed by "professionals" working the full year, and an upper chamber consisting of deputies of councils of various levels who would meet three to four times a year, as does the current parliament.⁴⁵ President Karimov justified these reforms as strengthening legislative power and ensuring the separation of powers, in accordance with the government's gradual approach to democratisation. But critics say that bicameral parliaments do not necessarily make the legislative process independent⁴⁶ and cite Belarus, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The lack of mechanisms to guarantee the enforcement of constitutional laws represents a flaw which undermines any good intentions of the drafters of the constitution of Uzbekistan adopted on 8 December 1992. The establishment of a two-chamber legislative body will not create a more equal balance between the branches of power in of and itself. Some observers consider that the true intent behind these parliamentary reforms is to achieve an even stronger executive branch.⁴⁷

The development of parties and other political institutions in Uzbekistan reflects a system wherein all participants are required to demonstrate absolute loyalty. There are seldom open disputes, and most often key political questions are addressed far from public scrutiny. Tensions within ruling circles are evident and although the precise dynamics are typically very difficult to reveal. One rare instance when open dispute emerged was the case of Shukrulla Mirsaidov, the first and last vice president of Uzbekistan. Mirsaidov represented the interests of the Tashkent elite, which had traditionally occupied one of the most prominent positions in the balance of power within Uzbekistan, though Karimov was not of this group. Mirsaidov's position as Vice-President was generally understood to be an accommodation of this group and his removal as a reflection of Karimov's consolidation of control within the capital. In 1991, the issue came to a head, when about 200 parliamentary deputies supported Mirsaidov in a stand-off with Karimov. Ultimately, Mirsaidov was accused of abuse of power and misappropriation of government funds and excluded from politics until he re-emerged as head of the Adolat party in 1995. Ultimately the opposition has been turned into another cog in the machine that supports the Karimov government.

Another example of the use of institutions to promote a system of loyalty is seen in the development of the organisation *Kamolot* ["Perfection"]. This began as the Kamolot Fund for support of talented youth — a quasi-autonomous entity, which has recently been transformed into something which aspires to be a mass youth organisation, not unlike the Soviet *Komsomol* (Communist Youth League) which served as a testing ground for the loyalty of aspirants to a career in the Communist Party. The transformation of Kamolot was motivated by concern that young people were increasingly susceptible to influences from radical groups. The organisation was tasked with engaging youth so as to avoid their being "lost" to the Islamists. On 25 April 2001, the government sponsored the first congress of the Kamolot youth movement. Contrary to rules prohibiting the establishment of representative offices of political organizations within enterprises and educational institutions, the government has now charged Kamolot with this mandate, and has even stipulated that these should be paid positions, integral to the institutions, precisely as they had been with Komsomol in the Soviet system.

⁴³ *Human Rights Watch World Report 2001* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2001), section on Uzbekistan, available at:

<http://www.hrw.org/wr2k1/europe/uzbekistan.html>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, quoting Agence France-Presse.

⁴⁵ Alisher Ilkhamov, "A bicameral parliament for Uzbekistan," *Eurasia Insight* (New York: OSI), 22 June 2000, available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav062200.shtml>.

⁴⁶ Mikhail Ardzinov, Chairman of Independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, telephone conversation, 17 July 2001.

⁴⁷ ICG phone conversation with the president of the Union of Independent Journalists of Uzbekistan and the chairman of press-centre of HRSU, Ruslan Sharipov, 23 July 2001.

There is little sign that this organisation will prove to be more than another bureaucratic innovation, with scant prospects of building loyalty among those who could turn toward the radical underground. The newly founded movement has already been criticised by independent analysts for being as weak as the “mature” official political parties in confronting social and economic problems. A veteran of the Centre of Secondary Specialised and Professional Education of the Ministry of Public Education lamented, “Our state is like a sick tree which gives fruitless boughs, and this new organisation is not capable of protecting our youth from negative influences. Poverty, corruption and lack of a unifying ideology have not been tackled by the mighty top political leadership. How does one expect a poor youth organisation to solve the current problems that are severely affecting young men and women?” Fear of “losing” young people is often expressed by central government officials, and has resulted in frequent accusations that regional governors do not work to resolve issues related to youth, thus allowing the central government to distance itself from the responsibility of solving problems at a national level. The emigration of Uzbekistan’s young and talented intellectuals and professionals continues to be a problem, as are the increasing numbers joining the ranks of banned religious groups.

C. ISLAMIC OPPOSITION

Nearly 90 per cent of Uzbekistan’s inhabitants are Sunni Muslims, following the Hanafi branch of Islam.⁴⁸ First glasnost, and later independence brought hope to many that they would be able to openly practice their beliefs, and the 1989-1991 period witnessed an outpouring of enthusiasm all across Uzbekistan for the revival of Islam. During this short period, foreign missionaries gained relatively easy access to the country to promote their visions of religious revival, and new mosques and religious schools appeared everywhere with the support of external assistance and community donations. Young Muslims went abroad to learn about Islam, and international Islamic foundations

sent reams of religious literature. This religious freedom meant different things for different Muslims in Uzbekistan: some continued a secular approach that treated Islam as a cultural element in the broader Uzbek national culture. Others practised more or less superficial observance of Islam, without any deep knowledge or devotion. Still others went further in their religious education and practice and became open proponents of one or another Islamic dogmas. Religious figures and their followers, particularly among the more radical youth, openly criticised government corruption and argued for the establishment of Islamic Sharia law and governance of the society according to Islamic principles of justice and morality.

In the early 1990s, the Karimov government also embraced Islamic revival as another tool for building popular support and legitimacy. President Karimov paid an official visit to Saudi Arabia and undertook a brief hajj to Mecca in 1992 to establish solidarity and foster support for his government among Islamic countries and establish his credentials as a good Muslim leader. When sworn in as the first president of Uzbekistan in 1991, Karimov held the Qur’an in one hand and the constitution in the other. However, beyond such public demonstrations of “devotion”, the government has had a very ambivalent relationship to Islam, and has sought increasingly tight control of religious observance and organisations. The Muftiyat of Uzbekistan, a direct successor to the earlier Soviet “Spiritual Directorate of Central Asia and Kazakhstan,” regulates the activities of local Muslim communities — despite the official separation of religion and state guaranteed in the constitution.⁴⁹ The Uzbek government has continued the Soviet practice of designating an acceptable, non-threatening realm for Islamic activities and organisations, and severely restricting what it does not specifically support.

Another dimension of this period of religious liberalism was that “unofficial” Islam became more prominent in Uzbekistan. Many Muslims

⁴⁸ Official figures on the government website put the number of Muslims at 88 per cent (see the section on “General information on Uzbekistan” at: <http://www.uznews.com/general.shtml>).

⁴⁹ *The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan*, Chapter XIII: Social Associations, Article 61: Religious organisations and associations are separate from the state and equal before the law. The state does not interfere in the activities of religious associations.

began following independent imams⁵⁰ who rejected the dictates of the state over religious activities. Observant Muslims were often reluctant to accept the rules of the official Muslim Board, which they viewed as an instrument of government control. Thus, tensions grew between popular Islam — ordinary Muslims and their local leaders — and the official Islamic hierarchy and the security services which supported it. As the new government consolidated the institutions of authoritarianism, the underground activity of banned Islamic groups increased. This was given greater impetus by growing perceptions that a narrow, Western-oriented elite was reaping all of the benefits of the sale of the nation's wealth abroad.⁵¹

Several national and regional Islamic groups emerged in 1991. The *Adolat* ["Justice"] Islamic movement that originated in the city of Namangan gained considerable popular support for its successful, albeit vigilante-style efforts to combat crime and improve social order based on its notion of Sharia law. During the crackdown on the opposition in 1992, which was particularly harsh on Islamic groups, a number of members of *Adolat* were imprisoned, but its leadership escaped by fleeing to Afghanistan and Iran. Another party from Namangan Province, *Tovba* ["Repentance"] was also banned in 1992. The Uzbekistan branch of the Islamic Renaissance Party, or IRP (an all-USSR organisation founded in 1990 in Astrakhan, Russia) was never allowed to function openly before it completely vanished. It was banned in 1992, and the subsequent campaign to suppress the party reportedly saw the arrest of hundreds of IRP members. Abdulla Ótaev, leader of the Uzbekistan branch of the IRP, disappeared in December 1992, and though officially Tashkent is "unaware" of his disappearance,⁵² observers generally believe the

theory that he was detained and killed by the security services. When it was banned, the IRP was believed to have some 50,000 followers, mainly from the Ferghana Valley centres of Andijan and Namangan — areas which have been the focus of some of the most severe government efforts to crack down on unofficial Islamic groups.

A variety of Islamic orientations have found broad support, especially in the Ferghana Valley. One group which was particularly at odds with the government was the Wahhabi movement, the ranks of which included a number of religious figures like Abduvali Qari Mirzaev. It must be noted that the term Wahhabi has been widely used by the Soviet government and its successors as a catch-all negative term to refer to any Muslim group that the government seeks to suppress, regardless of whether it is affiliated in any way with the doctrines or political aspirations of Wahhabism. However, there were some limited groups which came to espouse Wahhabism in the true sense, partially under the influence of Wahhabi activists from Saudi Arabia. The Wahhabis were mainly limited to the Ferghana Valley and suffered the same fate as other Islamic religious associations — imprisonment, harassment and exile. Another Ferghana Valley-based organisation was the *Islam Lashkarlari* ["Warriors of Islam"], which became a particular target of the government's ire after a direct confrontation between its leader and President Karimov in December 1991.⁵³ Forced to flee prosecution, some Islamic groups moved from the Ferghana Valley to Tajikistan, Afghanistan,

⁵⁰ An *imam* is the prayer leader, usually associated with a particular mosque. Many such mosques had existed during Soviet times as part of non-political, underground Islam. Many of these emerged publicly with glasnost, but were not given official recognition, though there was an official effort to incorporate most such mosques and imams into the official hierarchy, which was partially successful.

⁵¹ For more information on the development of radical Islamism in Central Asia after it was driven into the underground and exile, see: "Central Asia: Islamist Mobilisation and Regional Security," ICG Asia Report, No. 14, 1 March 2001.

⁵² Human Rights Watch, "Uzbekistan: Persistent Human Rights Violations and Prospects for Improvement,"

Human Rights Watch Reports, Vol. 8, No. 5, May 1996, available at: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/UZBEK.htm>.

⁵³ *Islam Lashkarlari* appeared in Namangan in 1991 and functioned until 1992 when, as the result of the anti-Islamist campaign, many activists were imprisoned and many of the rest fled to Tajikistan, eventually joining the Islamist side in the civil war there. Tahir Yuldash, who was also involved in the *Adolat* Islamic Movement, was one of most active organizers of this group and he led it until he left the country in 1992. The general aspirations of the organisation were similar to those of *Adolat*, including the establishment of an Islamic state and Sharia law. In the course of unruly demonstrations in the city of Namangan on 9 December 1991, when Karimov travelled to the city and promised to fulfil the demands of the more than 10,000 demonstrators, there was an encounter between Yuldash and Karimov where Yuldash addressed Karimov in a humiliating manner and demanded his resignation.

and Iran.⁵⁴ Some of these were later to form the core of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), whose members fought together with Islamists against government forces in Tajikistan during that country's civil war.⁵⁵ By the end of 1992, the Uzbek government had effectively banned all non-government sponsored religious groups and re-asserted its control over the official Islamic clergy. Nevertheless, the official clergy itself has remained a problem for the government. While its members are aware that they are under close scrutiny of the security services and they are generally careful to demonstrate their loyalty, whether out of fear or sympathy with the regime, their official status provides a degree of cover for activities which are not strictly under the government's control and can feed into the broader Islamist opposition.

Uzbekistan's government viewed the civil war in Tajikistan with great concern, first, because strong Islamist movements in that country could help to strengthen Islamism in Uzbekistan, and later because the accommodation of Islamist forces which culminated in the Peace Accord of 1997 represented a precedent for the legitimisation of Islam as a force in politics. The rise of the Taliban and narcotics trafficking in Afghanistan were also seen by the Uzbek elite as threat to stability. With support for militancy growing within Uzbekistan, these external factors have contributed to the development of a fortress mentality among Uzbek leaders and efforts to cut off communications between Islamic groups within Uzbekistan and those in other countries. Members of even quite peaceable Islamic groups thus feel themselves under siege. This, combined with growing economic despair and the lack of legal channels for expression and pursuit of legitimate political interests, is increasing the politicisation of Muslims who formerly considered their faith to be a non-political, purely religious matter.

Another type of protest has emerged in the form of the Islamic international organisation *Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islamii* (Islamic Party of Liberation),

which became active in Uzbekistan in the 1990s and is spreading increasingly to other Central Asian states. Hizb ut-Tahrir advocates non-violent means to achieve its political goal of creating an Islamic caliphate based on Sharia law. Although the Uzbek branch of this international organisation shares the IMU's goal of overthrowing the current regime and establishing an Islamic state in Uzbekistan, the fact that Hizb ut-Tahrir rejects military measures, makes this movement more acceptable to many people. An extensive network of activists now operates underground, carrying out ideological work at the community level.⁵⁶

Hizb ut-Tahrir occupies a peculiar position between religion and politics. On the one hand, its main call is for a return to what members see as a more correct observance of Islam, though it claims not to be a proponent of a particular Islamic doctrine. Thus, its underground activities, especially in the women's branch of the organisation, are largely focused on making members and their communities "better Muslims". Yet the aspirations are ultimately political, focused on immediate problems within Uzbekistan, though the path to achieving them is not clear to many members.

The ranks of the party are increasing, and it is finding adherents in neighbouring states. A high level officer of the Andijan police department admitted that they were powerless to prevent the movement from attracting growing numbers due to economic hardship, increasing disenchantment with government controls, and an absence of a unifying state ideology.⁵⁷ He expressed the view that the government's anti-Hizb ut-Tahrir propaganda would have little impact in the absence of more effective measures to improve people's lives: "The party reflects ordinary citizens' moods,

⁵⁴ ICG Interview with human rights activists, Namangan, June 2001.

⁵⁵ Evgenii Abdullaev, "Islam i "islamskii faktor" v sovremennom Uzbekistane [Islam and the "Islamic factor" in contemporary Uzbekistan," *Tsentral'naia Aziia i Kavkaz*, No. 12, 1997, available at: http://www.ca-c.org/journal/12_1997/st_12_abdullaev.shtml.

⁵⁶ Members of the party regularly distribute leaflets and go to people's homes to discuss social, political and economic events as part of their recruitment efforts. Their activities are highly secretive, especially in Uzbekistan, where individuals caught in possession of the leaflets are commonly sentenced to long prison terms in prison labour camps.

⁵⁷ The police official maintained the view that the government's official ideology, called "Ideology of National Independence", and current internal policies are predominantly nationalistic and anti-Islamic. He argued the proclaimed ideology antagonises non-Uzbeks and practicing Muslims, while failing to unite people of different ethnic groups and political orientations.

and if some Muslims follow this non-violent party — but not the IMU — we should work with them peacefully, or they might join the IMU. Then we will have more serious problems.”

At present, a number of different Islamic groups operate to one degree or another in the underground in Uzbekistan. These include the Naqshbandiya and Yasawiya Sufi orders which have deep historical roots in the region and have experienced a revival following independence. Other groups include the Wahhabi, Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Akramiya (a radical off-shoot of Hizb ut-Tahrir), and a small group of Shi’a Muslims. The government of Uzbekistan has used a variety of means to try to control these groups, ranging from eradication to efforts to co-opt them. The government has officially embraced the Naqshbandiya as part of the country’s historical legacy in Islam, though it remains nervous about the actual members of the order, who are harder to control than the historical legacy.⁵⁸ In another tack, the government proposed in 2000 to former Mufti Muhammad Yusuf Muhammad Sadiq that he return to Uzbekistan to unite all Muslim factions under the umbrella of the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan. The former Mufti, who had come from Libya to visit his parents in Andijan, rejected the offer. Once a very popular mufti, Muhammad Yusuf had been accused by the government of misappropriating foreign aid delivered for religious purposes. While the merit of those charges remains unclear, the government attacks were more likely driven by his growing popularity among various Islamic groups. The current Mufti of Uzbekistan, Abdurashid Qari Bahramov, who was appointed by the president despite the separation of church and state codified in the constitution, does not have much support, making it difficult for the government to consolidate Muslim communities or use the official Islamic organisation as an effective means for influencing the population.⁵⁹

According to Yodgor Obid, an Uzbek political refugee in Austria who represented Uzbekistan’s Society for Human Rights at a roundtable meeting of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights in Vienna in October 2000, “In Uzbekistan’s autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan, about 15,000 political prisoners are detained in a concentration camp. While political opposition in Uzbekistan is heavily suppressed, the socio-economic situation in the country is worsening, bringing the threat of economic collapse and even famine. Yet religious extremism is not a real threat. The government invokes the so-called threat of religious extremism as a smokescreen for the authorities to suppress political dissent.”⁶⁰ Other estimates have put the total number of political prisoners in Uzbekistan closer to 7,000.⁶¹ Such large-scale detention of religious leaders and secular dissidents has contributed to the sharp rise of social tension and created an environment where people are more inclined to support an armed opposition.

Over the past three to four years, Islamist opposition movements have become the most serious threat to the government of Uzbekistan. At present, one may distinguish clearly between the militants such as the IMU and non-militant underground movements, the strongest of which is Hizb ut-Tahrir. However, there are increasing grounds for concern that — thanks to worsening conditions and state repression — non-militant opposition will become increasingly ready to take up arms against the regime.

⁵⁸ This official endorsement of the Naqshbandiya has been reflected in celebrations of the 675th anniversary of the birth of the order’s “founder”, Bahauddin Naqshband in 1993, and the renovation of the shrine complex associated with him in Bukhara.

⁵⁹ The government distributes materials which the imams in the official Islamic hierarchy should use in the Friday prayers; attitudes vary among imams toward these dictates, and many are not enthusiastic or effective participants in this mechanism for propagating ideology.

⁶⁰ “Report on a round table meeting at the IHF Secretariat, Vienna, 6 October 2000” (Vienna: International Helsinki Federation, 18 October 2000), available at: <http://www.ihf-hr.org/appeals/001018.htm>. The discussion was attended by human rights organisations from Central Asia and Russia, as well as observers from OSCE delegations of Austria, Russia, Romania, and Radio Liberty.

⁶¹ Independent Human Rights Organisation of Uzbekistan, *Newsletter*, February 2001.

III. REGIONAL DIVISIONS, PATRONAGE NETWORKS AND ETHNIC RIVALRIES

In creating Uzbekistan in 1924 as a “national” republic which would gather most Uzbeks in a single administrative unit, parts of the territories of three former states were divided and reassembled: the Khanate of Khiva, the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Qoqand. However, the population of Central Asia is a mosaic of different groups, and the resulting republic was far from ethnically homogenous. Among the Uzbeks themselves there were a great many distinct identities, including nomads and settled groups, and various communities, such as Qipchaqs and Türki which had not previously considered themselves Uzbeks. There were numerous other groups including Persian-speaking Tajiks, Turkmen and Kazak nomads, Jews, Arabs, Tatars and, of course, some recent immigrants from Russia.⁶² Two of Uzbekistan’s most important cities, Samarqand and Bukhara, were inhabited overwhelmingly by Tajik/Persian-speakers. Some regions of the country had been settled for millennia, such as the Ferghana Valley and the oases of Bukhara and Kharazm, whereas nomads predominated in provinces such as Qashqa-Darya and Surkhan-Darya.

Confronting the problem of regionalism in one of his books, Islam Karimov notes, “Historically Central Asia had no traditions for building up a state system based on national indications. All states, that had existed here before the Russian colonisation, were established mostly on the basis of dynastic or territorial principles.”⁶³ He sees regional diversity as providing a potential “lever” for outside forces to undermine the unity of Uzbekistan, and calls for the development of national ideology to overcome divisiveness in the state-building process.⁶⁴ The Soviet period did much to foster the development of a national consciousness among Uzbeks, but this did not erase other identities and social networks, which

actually were reinforced by the Soviet bureaucratic and administrative system.

As of today, several regionally based elite patronage networks play a key role in the political life of the country, including: “Fan” (the Ferghana Valley elite⁶⁵), “Surkash” (influential circles in Surkhan-Darya and Qashqa-Darya provinces in the south of Uzbekistan), Samarqand (sometimes also including Bukhara Province), Tashkent, and Kharazm. The patronage networks based in these regions form the lines along which rivalries for power and influence are played out, though it must also be noted that region does not provide an automatic predictor of loyalty, and patronage alliances are built on a variety of other cross-cutting and contradictory criteria as well. The existence of these networks has undermined the development of national political movements, and has provided a tool for Moscow — as well as for the current leadership — to exercise control.

When President Karimov came to power, his background was in the Samarqand elite group, but his success was in balancing different regional groups and playing them off against one another. President Karimov also argued that some of his efforts to strengthen the role of the chief executive were warranted by the need to prevent regional tensions from leading to instability. However, during the period of President Karimov’s consolidation of power, one of his chief allies was the former First Deputy Prime Minister Ismail Jórabekov, who, like the president himself, was from the influential Samarqand group and a preponderance of official posts were allocated to members of the Samarqand elite. Other regions consequently felt that they had been slighted in the allocation of national financial resources and power.

During the first years of independence, Karimov sought to solidify his position by reaching out to various constituencies among different segments of society. For example, he politically rehabilitated the former First Secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party, Sharaf Rashidov, who headed Soviet Uzbekistan from 1959 until his death in 1983. Rashidov had been severely discredited in

⁶² See, for example, John Schoeberlein, “The prospects for Uzbek national identity,” *Central Asia Monitor*, No. 2, pp. 12-20, 1996.

⁶³ Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century* (Tashkent: Uzbekiston Publishing House, 1997), p. 86.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90, 119-121.

⁶⁵ Called “Fan” as an acronym formed from the names of the Ferghana Valley provinces in Uzbekistan: Ferghana, Andijan and Namangan.

the anti-corruption campaign which characterised Gorbachev's early rule, in what came to be called the "Uzbek affair". This campaign led to investigations of hundreds of officials in Uzbekistan, and produced deep resentment that Uzbekistan was being singled out and victimised by Moscow. On his appointment as First Secretary of the Uzbek Communist Party, Karimov sought to gain credibility among the republic's elite by reversing hundreds of convictions from the anti-corruption campaign and making a national hero out of Rashidov.⁶⁶ Though this policy was very effective in consolidating power, it was a clear reversal of the goals of increasing accountability and reducing the corruption which was a major problem for the economy.

Apart from regional tensions, Uzbekistan has also been beset with ethnic tensions and violence, mainly in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The first major clashes occurred in June 1989 with a pogrom against the Meskhetian Turks, who had been deported to Central Asia — especially the Ferghana Valley – from the Caucasus by Stalin in 1944. The events began in the small town of Quvasay in Ferghana Province, where a highly charged atmosphere and a dispute in the market quickly escalated into widespread killings of Meskhetian Turks and a two-week pogrom that resulted in hundreds of deaths and caused virtually all of the some 100,000 Meskhetian Turks living in Uzbekistan to flee the republic.⁶⁷ The circumstances surrounding these events are very murky and may entail an element of official provocation (as many locals assert⁶⁸), but a key factor was the perception that the Meskhetians were better off than Uzbeks and were benefiting disproportionately due to their strong position in local markets.

Another area where some perceive a risk of ethnic violence surrounds the cities of Samarqand and Bukhara, with their traditionally predominant Tajik

populations. Though there have never been broad popular demands by the inhabitants of these cities for their inclusion in Tajikistan, some in that country have made such claims,⁶⁹ and some among the Tajik inhabitants have demanded a greater role for Tajik culture, language, and identity, which have been suppressed through Uzbek dominance in both Soviet and post-Soviet times. A political movement and some minor demonstrations in the late 1980s seeking recognition of Tajik national culture achieved some success, though this was reversed by the early 1990s, when the government cracked down on political pluralism and began a campaign to promote Uzbek national culture.⁷⁰ The position of Tajiks in Samarqand and Bukhara grew more complicated with the civil war in Tajikistan, when many would have wished to provide refuge to fleeing relatives but Uzbekistan refused to accept refugees and indeed sought to cut all links with Tajikistan. This created difficulties for Tajiks who travelled between Samarqand and Tajikistan, while also giving a boost to the black economy in goods smuggled into Tajikistan from Samarqand.

The civil war in Tajikistan effectively put an end to any pan-Tajikist aspirations in Uzbekistan. In an effort to establish a more homogeneous ethnic identity in Uzbekistan and forestall the possible rise of nationalism among Tajiks, the Uzbek government has (in keeping with a 2000 decree by the Cabinet of Ministers) destroyed books written in the Tajik language that it feels are not in keeping with national ideology, triggering resentment in the ethnic Tajik community.

Other regional tensions have pervaded the Ferghana Valley, including those sourced to the appearance of the Islamist movements, such as Adolat and Islam Lashkarlari, discussed above. In 1997 there was a series of killings of policemen in Namangan. The government quickly responded by cracking down on religious groups. The police

⁶⁶ Donald Carlisle, "Islam Karimov and Uzbekistan: back to the future?," in *Patterns in Post-Soviet Leadership* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1995), pp.191-216.

⁶⁷ The official numbers (which are generally considered an undercount) listed 97 deaths, over 1,000 wounded and 752 houses burned to the ground. See: Emil Payin, "The tragedy of the Meskhetian Turks," *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 1, pp. 36-37, 1992.

⁶⁸ Extensive ICG interviews in Uzbekistan and Osh Province of Kyrgyzstan in June-July 2001.

⁶⁹ Mirza Ziyayev, the Minister for Emergency Situation of Tajikistan and former member of the United Tajik Opposition stated that Samarqand and Bukhara, "being traditional Tajik cities, should be included within Tajikistan's borders sometimes in the future". See: Bruce Pannier, "Central Asia: border dispute between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan risks triggering conflict", *RFE/RL Magazine*, 8 March 1999, available at: <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/1999/03/F.RU.990308134050.html>.

⁷⁰ Richard Foltz, "The Tajiks of Uzbekistan," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1996), pp. 213-216.

detained hundreds of people because they wore religious clothes, had beards or prayed in a manner that identified them as members of “suspicious” groups. A former Wahhabi student, who had been arrested in late December 1997 for having a beard and wearing Muslim attire, said, “We, as followers of the Hanbali School, put our feet wider and say Allahu Akbar more loudly. We can also be distinguished by small difference in our rituals. During those days, the police inspected all the mosques in our town. The authorities had a list of those thought to be ‘too religious’ and a new, wider campaign of arrests began”.⁷¹ Speaking before the parliament in May 1998 President Karimov put his view bluntly: “These people [Wahhabis] should be shot in the head, and if necessary I will shoot them myself.”⁷² This message sent a clear signal to security forces to further step up persecution on religious grounds.

Namangan Province continues to be the object of particular government suspicion. Nosir Zokir, a correspondent for Radio Liberty in Namangan, said that severe pressure on the city had created an invisible state within the state. City residents would not forget Karimov’s harsh suppression, he said, adding that Namangan has been historically hostile to dictatorial rulers.⁷³ The imam of a mosque in Kasansay District of Namangan similarly stressed, “We did not seek war, but we were treated immorally; several thousand people were imprisoned. I know people will not forget it; they will not forgive it. The state relies on our fear, but this fear is converting into anger.”⁷⁴

President Karimov has written: “We should keep underlining that there is only one Uzbek nation in the world, and there are not any national differences between descendants from Khoresmi, Ferghana or Surkhandarya: they are the Uzbeks.”⁷⁵ Despite this vision of a monolithic Uzbek nation in which there are no regional distinctions, the power of regional elite groups remains an important

feature of Uzbekistan’s political life. In order to eliminate the “corrupted legacy” of regionalism,⁷⁶ the government makes a practice of frequently reshuffling the regional and city officials, which also has the effect of ensuring that no one builds a strong network. This rotation and removal of potential opponents of the regime is commonly justified by their “failure to meet economic targets and improve living conditions” or simply by their “transfer to another position.”

This strategy has also created the potential for a bitter and explosive battle over Karimov’s successor that could trigger confrontation between regional elites. Analysts have identified the problem of succession as key to the future stability of Central Asia, concluding that the president’s fear of rivals has not allowed for any real preparation for succession: “Money and violence might well decide the outcome in a succession struggle; if related issues such as ethnicity, general conflict or foreign meddling were involved, it could turn into a civil war.”⁷⁷ Some government officials have confidentially expressed concern that the president suffers from cancer,⁷⁸ although no official statements have been made on his health. Given that the president’s image is protected by law, and that any statements damaging his status are punishable, information on the president and his ministers can only be gleaned from informal sources.

Some experts on the politics of Uzbekistan warn that there is a growing danger of a coup attempt by powerful figures from within the elite — businessmen and former government officials. This theory reverberates in the commonly held view that bombings in Tashkent in February 1999 were linked to an internal coup attempt. The evidence supporting this theory is weak, perhaps inevitably given that Tashkent’s circles of power are opaque. Arkady Dubnov, a correspondent of the Russian daily newspaper “*Vremia novosti*” who is known for his expertise on the region, has suggested the

⁷¹ ICG interview, Namangan, 3 July 2001.

⁷² Daniel Williams, “Uzbeks caught between secular, Islamic currents,” *Washington Post Foreign Service*, 27 September 1998, p. A31. See also: Abdurahim Polat, “Birlik against President Karimov’s ruthless statements,” 8 April 1999, available at: <http://www.birlik.net/appeal/bay8ap99.html>.

⁷³ ICG interview, Namangan, 3 July 2001.

⁷⁴ ICG interview, 27 June 2001.

⁷⁵ Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold...*, p. 88.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 87.

⁷⁷ Charles Fairbanks, S. Frederick Starr, C. Richard Nelson, Kenneth Weisbrode, *Strategic Assessment of Central Asia* (Washington DC: The Atlantic Council of the United States and Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, January 2001), p. 17.

⁷⁸ ICG interviewed several high-ranking officials representing law-enforcement agencies and the Central Bank in June-July 2001.

possibility that officials from the highest echelons of power participated in the terrorist attacks on the president.⁷⁹ A more specific, though entirely circumstantial theory in this vein associates the bombings with former First Deputy Prime Minister Ismail Jórabekov. Prior to these events, Jórabekov was considered the president's closest ally. In November 1998, he was "retired due to his advanced age" and disappeared from public view. This occurred at the same time as a number of members of the Samarqand elite were dismissed and accused of corruption, though Jórabekov himself was never charged. Immediately after the bombings, rumours began circulating that Jórabekov was behind them.⁸⁰ In the following month, Jórabekov reappeared to occupy a newly established ministerial-level position in the cabinet. Whether or not there is any connection with the bombings, these developments would appear to indicate that Karimov was unsuccessful in sidelining Jórabekov. And whether or not these bombings represent an alliance between powerful insiders and the ordinary political dissidents who were involved in implementing the plot, the possibility of such alliances remains. President Karimov is doubtless nervous about the loyalty of people whom he has sought to marginalise in his efforts to dominate ruling circles.

Blood kinship has also traditionally been a powerful force in Uzbek society. Strong ties between relatives in communal Uzbek society usually require extended moral, social and political support for family members. Wealthy and influential kinsmen are expected to provide jobs to brothers, nephews, brothers-in-law and children. This extensive patronage system can be found from the bottom to the top of the political and economic ladders. Even more than the regional patronage system, patterns of kinship patronage are thriving in Uzbekistan. A 1998 scandal involving

the Governor of Samarqand Province, revealed that his brother served as the acting chief of Department of Internal Affairs in the Narpay District; his nephew was the head of the State Automobile Inspection in the Kattaqórghan District; and another relative held the post of prosecutor in Ishtikhan District. Further, three other close relatives occupied senior positions on the Tax Committee of the Kattaqórghan District. In total, more than twenty relatives and close friends enjoyed the direct patronage of the former governor.

Very often businesses are run by people whose relatives are well placed in the government. Loyalty to the president remains a major requirement for career promotion and allows high-ranking officials to monopolise the main sectors of the economy. "You will not find an outsider in any kind of business — we all have protectors up in the president's office or mayor's office or the Cabinet of Ministers. I have a brother-in-law in the Tashkent Tax Committee who helped me to get a job in [the] Privatisation Department of Tashkent City Mayor's Office. We help each other and help common friends. We can trust each other and do not want interference. This is a closed club," said a young man who came to Tashkent from Osh several years ago and managed to buy a house for \$50,000 and a new Daewoo Nexia car for \$4,000 despite earning an official monthly salary of only \$15.⁸¹

This closed circle of nepotism and patronage nurtures a fundamental corruption that continues to sap Uzbekistan of initiative, ambition and professionalism. While the roots of this corruption are deep, a system of one-man rule reliant on obedience to the regime rather than professional and moral qualities has only encourage its further growth. Uzbekistan's national wealth remains concentrated in the hands of a powerful political and business oligarchy to the detriment of the general population.

Relations with ethnic minorities have grown more problematic as a result of the security operations conducted to prevent Islamist militant incursions over the past several years. Despite weak evidence of their involvement, 73 ethnic Tajiks residents of the Sariasiya District of Surkhan-Darya Province

⁷⁹ Arkady Dubnov, "Uzbekistan: lost image of stable government," *Network of Independent Journalists Weekly* (Split, Croatia: STINA Independent Press Agency), No. 114, 27 February 1999, available at: http://www.wfu.edu/~kourmb9/kaznews/Uzbekistan_aftershocks.html

⁸⁰ The correspondent Arkady Dubnov links Jórabekov with the Tashkent bombings as a response to an anti-corruption campaign initiated by Islam Karimov in 1998. He believes Ismail Jórabekov's close associates, including allegedly some of the most notorious criminal bosses in the country, Ghafur and Salim, could have organised the attacks in response for firing this major patron of Uzbek shadow economy (see the aforementioned article).

⁸¹ ICG confidential interview.

were given prison sentences of three to eighteen years in June 2001 trials in Tashkent for alleged collaboration with IMU fighters who had attacked the southern Uzbek border a year before.⁸² The homes of communities living close to the Uzbek-Tajik border were destroyed, and the hundred or more families who suffered displacement as a result of the incursions were offered only poorly equipped accommodation at a camp.

The government's policy of marginalising populations inhabiting these border areas has proven counterproductive, increasing sentiment that guerrilla forces are more supportive than Tashkent. Many Tajiks live in Uzbekistan's Surkhan-Darya Province near the border with Tajikistan and have experienced the negative effects of Uzbekistan's policy of isolating Tajikistan, which recently includes mining the borders in an area where some of these people conduct their livelihood. This has an impact also on the broader population of Tajiks in Uzbekistan, of whom there are around 1.5 million,⁸³ as well as Tajiks in neighbouring Tajikistan. Antagonism toward Uzbekistan and Uzbeks has grown sharply since independence as a result of the perception that Tajiks are badly treated in Uzbekistan.

The heightened tensions also affect ethnic Uzbeks. In March 2001, about 50 ethnic Uzbeks holding Tajik citizenship and living in Uzbekistan were forcefully deported to the Tajik border, where Tajik authorities refused to accept them. These Uzbeks had fled to Surkhan-Darya Province during the civil war in Tajikistan, and the Uzbek government considered that their proximity to the Tajik border could facilitate collaboration between the IMU and citizens of Tajikistan. A report covering this incident expressed concern that it could be a precursor to a broad campaign to expel

Uzbeks who are citizens of Tajikistan.⁸⁴ While obviously of smaller scale, deportation of "suspicious" groups bears eerie similarity to Stalin's policy on the deportation of Chechens, Koreans, Tatars and other ethnic groups during the Soviet period. Such repressive measures, far from promoting security, only stoke antagonism to the Uzbekistan government, among Uzbeks and Tajiks alike. This increases the likelihood that citizens will "look the other way" when incursions targeting government forces are mounted.

Large Uzbek minorities also live in neighbouring countries⁸⁵ – an estimated 2.5 million residing mainly in Osh and Jalal-Abad Provinces of Kyrgyzstan, the Shimkent and Jambil areas of Kazakhstan, Sughd Province and the Hisar region of Tajikistan, and the oases of Tashauz and Charjev in Turkmenistan. Prevented from free travel into Uzbekistan, they suffer the vagaries of changing visa regimes, often arbitrary customs regulations and the unlawful behaviour of law-enforcement officers at the borders. For instance, residents of southern Kyrgyzstan may not enter more than 100 km into Uzbekistani territory. To obtain an Uzbekistani visa allowing travel to Tashkent (about 400 km from Osh), they must first travel overland fifteen hours (one way) to the Embassy of Uzbekistan in Bishkek. During the civil war in Tajikistan, Uzbek refugees who had fled to Uzbekistan were refused citizenship or residency and were forced to reside illegally.

Human rights activists in the Jalalabad and Osh Provinces of Kyrgyzstan have raised complaints concerning the kidnapping of Kyrgyz citizens of Uzbek ethnic origin on Kyrgyz territory by the Uzbek National Security Service and their subsequent covert transfer to Uzbekistan. A Jalal-Abad human rights organisation told ICG that during 1999 at least four Kyrgyz citizens were kidnapped and are currently serving prison terms of twelve to sixteen years in Uzbekistan. The Chief Prosecutor's office of Uzbekistan rejected

⁸² Marie Struthers, "Human rights activist provides a view of Tashkent trials," *EurasiaNet Human Rights*, 10 July 2001, available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/rights/articles/eav071001.shtml>.

⁸³ According to a report of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Tajiks represent four per cent of Uzbekistan's population, or 1,253,840 people. See: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Population Migration in Uzbekistan, 1989-1998" (Second Edition, Tashkent, 1999), Annexes 2-3, "Distribution of the population by major ethnic groups," pp.38-39.

⁸⁴ "Report of forced deportation could heighten Tajik-Uzbek tension," *Eurasia Insight*, 5 April 2001, available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav032801.shtml>.

⁸⁵ Ethnic Uzbeks comprise 25 per cent of Tajikistan's population; 12.9 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's; 9.2 per cent of Turkmenistan's; and 2.3 percent of Kazakhstan's. See: CIA, 2000 *World Factbook*, available at: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/uz.html>

Kyrgyzstan's demand to return these illegally held Uzbeks.⁸⁶ Kyrgyz and international media sources have raised this issue in their publications,⁸⁷ but even if Bishkek were to become more vocal in protesting these actions, it would likely have little useful result. Instead, it would only point up the impotence of the Kyrgyz authorities in the face of violations of their sovereignty.

Uzbekistan's Russian and Slav minorities have not heavily influenced Uzbekistan's internal and external policies, and the steady outflow of ethnic Russians — as it does across most of Central Asia. In the ten years from 1989 to 1999, Uzbekistan's ethnic Russian population dwindled by more than 50 per cent, with ethnic Russians now only 3.4 per cent of the population.⁸⁸ After IMU incursions into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan during the previous two years, the 1999 bomb explosions in Tashkent and continued economic hardships, the migration of Russians and other ethnic minorities from Uzbekistan has again accelerated. The largest concentrations of Russians are in Tashkent and Samarqand, with much smaller populations in other cities.

IV. A RISING TIDE OF SOCIAL DISCONTENT

The pervasive authoritarianism of Uzbekistan's political system is also felt in the economy. Heavy industry, energy and major exports such as cotton — all viewed by the government as “strategic assets” — remain under direct state control. The patronage system, which determines who occupies positions of power, also encompasses positions of control over the country's capacity to produce wealth. The largest exports, including cotton and gold, are under the control of a few individuals who acquire (or lose) these positions at the behest of the president.

Meanwhile, cotton, the crop that brings in most of Uzbekistan's wealth, is impoverishing much of the population. Producers are required to adhere to a quota system, just as in Soviet times, and likewise to sell their crop to buyers determined by the state at prices that are only a small fraction of the market rate. The cotton farmers could not survive if they had to sustain themselves by this economy, and it is their subsistence production and sale of garden products which put bread on the table — and little more than just bread for many.

In other sectors as well, Uzbekistan has been one of the least willing among former Soviet republics to embrace economic reform and privatisation. Estimates indicate that upwards of 70 per cent of the country's gross domestic product continues to be generated by state-owned or financed enterprises.⁸⁹ Participation in joint ventures usually requires heavy fees to the government. Further, given the weakness of the rule of law, most businesses still consider close (and well-financed) political ties as the only way to assure redress if they are confronted with regulatory or other difficulties.

The government also maintains close control over licenses, permits and many banking transactions as a way to skim off profits, strengthen the patronage system and maintain influence. For example, since 1996, Uzbekistan has operated a system of multiple exchange rates with an official rate and a

⁸⁶ Interview with ICG, Jalal-Abad, June 2001.

⁸⁷ See, for instance, the last report on covert operations of Uzbek NSS on the Kyrgyz territory by Karamat Toktobaeva and Ulugbek Babakulov, “Uzbekistan wrapped for illegal arrests,” *Reporting Central Asia* (London: Institute for War & Peace), No. 52, 18 May 2001.

⁸⁸ UN High Commissioner for Refugees, “*Population Migration in Uzbekistan...*,” Annex 3: “Distribution of the population by major ethnic groups,” p. 38.

⁸⁹ Freedom House, *Nations in Transit, 1999-2000* (New York: Freedom House, [2000]), available at: <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/nattransit.htm>.

commercial exchange rate (which unsurprisingly has also created both a thriving black market in currency exchange and persistent inflation problems). In order to obtain permits for currency conversion, companies are usually required to provide necessary “fees” to well-placed government officials. Such permits then allow “smart businessmen” to purchase hard currency three times cheaper than those lacking such government permits. Many of the limited companies with access to hard currency then become well positioned to trade currency on the black market. As one banker noted to ICG, the multiple exchange rate system has generated millions of dollars in “the black economy, having enriched a very limited group of people and ruining the businesses of many promising entrepreneurs who struggle to survive this unfair economic battle.”

Corruption and criminal economic activity, long a feature of the Soviet system, have intensified since independence and become a major impediment to political and economic reforms. As one observer noted, the first move of the new government in the early 1990s was to release all those who were previously convicted of corruption, the majority of whom steadily came back to power, receiving high-level government posts. As he put it: “Corruption did not vanish, rather it was simply recycled.”⁹⁰

Bribery, nepotism, embezzlement and cronyism lead to mounting public frustration and rob Uzbekistan of its brightest potential leadership. One young man, a fourth son in a large family in Tashkent who failed to enter Tashkent Economics University despite excellent high school grades, abandoned his hope for higher education. “I did not receive a gold medal at high school because somebody paid for one for his daughter,” he told ICG, “and I was deliberately given a lower score. Then I twice failed at the university because my father could not afford to pay for my education. I am only twenty, but I’ve lost any hope that I can make my life the way I dreamt it would be when I was a school-boy.”⁹¹

Officially, education and healthcare are free, but individuals are forced to pay under the table to receive services. Uzbekistan’s political elite often works closely with criminal groups to provide “krysha” (a roof in Russian) or protection. While several criminal groups were liquidated in the early stages of independence, the strongest mafia elements continue to run businesses controlled by corrupt politicians. Mafia figures control extensive crime networks, and are well known by the public as some of the richest people in Uzbekistan. These groups run businesses not just in Uzbekistan but are also known to have opened restaurants and casinos in Europe and to have bought expensive houses abroad. Given the vast profits being reaped by the few beneficiaries of the current system, there is little impetus for political or economic reform.

Any attempt to criticise government corruption is quite risky since Uzbekistan’s judicial system is not independent and cannot protect critics from arbitrary charges. A number of journalists have discovered this at considerable personal cost. In March 2001 in Surkhan-Darya Province, journalist Majid Abduraimov was arrested for allegedly taking bribes and now faces several years of imprisonment. Abduraimov had earlier reported on numerous violations of law by the head of a grain production enterprise. Despite being assaulted and requesting protection from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, no assistance was provided. Ultimately, the local police apparently favoured a rich businessman instead of a journalist of modest means: U.S.\$6,000 was dropped in the reporter’s car by an unidentified person and the police were conveniently on hand to apprehend him immediately.⁹²

Many journalists have been forced to resort to using pseudonyms for fear of government reprisals. Courageous journalists like the victim of the story above often end their careers behind bars. Another example of the crackdown on the press can be found in the case of Shadi Mardiev, a well-known journalist from Samarqand Province, who was sentenced to eleven years imprisonment for criticism of Samarqand Deputy Prosecutor Talat

⁹⁰ Mikhail Degtiar, the Chairman of the Tashkent Jewish Cultural Centre; see: M. Degtiar, “Clans, cotton, and currency,” *Transitions Online* [on-line] (Prague), 2 October 2000, available at: <http://archive.tol.cz/oct00/clans.html>.

⁹¹ ICG interview, Tashkent, June 2001.

⁹² Aziza Umarova, “Campaigning Uzbek reporter ‘framed’,” *Reporting Central Asia* (London: IWPR), No. 56, 15 June 2001.

Abdulkhaliqzada. Despite an outcry from various international organisations demanding that journalists such as Mardiev be freed, and comments by Karimov that he would explore the matter, no action has been forthcoming.⁹³ Mardiev's health continues to deteriorate in prison.⁹⁴

Events in July 2001 further highlighted the extreme pressure on journalists in Uzbekistan. There was an attempt to assassinate the president of the Union of Independent Journalists of Uzbekistan and chairman of the HRSU press centre⁹⁵, Ruslan Sharipov. Also, Ala Khójaev, the editor of the *Tashkentskaia pravda* newspaper, was removed from his job. Sharipov was attacked on 12 July by twelve security agents, some of whom he recognised. He said he suspected the assassination attempt was aimed to scare him since he has frequently published material critical of the government on Internet sites.⁹⁶ Similarly, the staff of *Tashkentskaia pravda* believe that the merger of their newspaper with *Toshkent haqiqati* was politically motivated, because the editor was viewed as "too independent" for a government newspaper. When Ala Khójaev learned that he was to be removed from his post, he argued that this was "the coup-de-grace for freedom of expression in Uzbekistan."⁹⁷ During 2000, the government placed restrictions on Internet use designed to connect all on-line services through government servers and eliminate access to information the state deemed undesirable.⁹⁸

⁹³ Zamira Eshanova and Furkat Yakvalhodjayev, "Uzbekistan: In spite of public outcry journalist remains imprisoned," *RFE/RL Features* (Prague), 3 Mar 2000, available at: <http://www.rferl.org/nca/features/2000/03/f.ru.000302144118.htm>.

⁹⁴ Telephone interview with the Andijan branch of Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, 2 July 2001.

⁹⁵ The Press Centre of HRSU maintains its official website at: <http://home.collegeclub.com/centralasia/pictures.html>.

⁹⁶ "Na prezidenta Soiuza zhurnalistov Uzbekistana napali predstaviteli spetssluzhby [The president of the Union of Journalists of Uzbekistan was attacked by representatives of the security services]," *Lenta.ru*, 13 July 2001, available at: <http://lenta.ru/most/2001/07/13/sharipov/>.

⁹⁷ Josh Machleder, "Editor's ouster has chilling effect on independent-minded journalists in Uzbekistan," *Eurasia Insight*, 11 July 2001, available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav071101.shtml>.

⁹⁸ *Human Rights Watch World Report 2001* (New York), section on Uzbekistan, available at: <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k1/europe/uzbekistan.html>.

In addition to repressing a free press, the Karimov regime has also often pitted different organs of the government against each other to ensure its hold on power. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, the National Security Service (NSS), the Prosecutor's Office and the Ministry of Defence have all been given high profile roles, and these organisations compete with each other for influence with the president and political dominance in the government. "Rival" organisations keep a close eye on each other in an effort to discredit competitors and win favour with the leadership. Given the enormous power wielded by agencies in Uzbekistan, such unhealthy practices in the security community are ultimately destabilising. While the turnover rate for government officials is high, the president has largely kept the highest ranking officials of the "power ministries" in place to promote loyalty and out of persistent fears of a coup. These ministers have been able to take full advantage of opportunities for nepotism and corruption as rivalry, power struggles and regional competition remain defining features of the domestic political scene.

The on-going effort by the government to crack down on individuals and their relatives who engage in "anti-state" activities continues to deeply divide Uzbekistan and generate public anger toward the regime. The campaign against those perceived to be "enemies of peace and prosperity in Uzbekistan" has been violent and is conducted without regard to law. In many ways, these campaigns are reminiscent of Stalin-era campaigns against "Trotskyites" and "saboteurs". Frequently relatives and neighbours of those designated as terrorists are forced to repudiate their loved ones, as in the case of Juma Namangani, whose mother was coerced to testify against him. This scene was widely broadcast on Channel 1 of Uzbek Television during the trial of the Tashkent bombing suspects in February 1999 in which Juma Namangani was sentenced in absentia.

Asked if people sincerely testified against their sons and brothers, a number of individuals admitted that the police harassed and threatened them into making their statements. Regular public show trials of groups of "enemies of state" are shown on national television and are intended to warn the public that any involvement in religious activity may bring severe punishment. Neighbourhoods are not allowed to participate in

the burials of Islamists who have died in police custody. A senior clergyman told ICG that the Minister of Internal Affairs, General Zakirjan Almatov, demanded that imams declare a jihad against Islamists, saying “You should tell people that they [Islamists] are our common enemies and we must eliminate them before they dare raise their heads.”⁹⁹

Actions against Islamists do have some support among the secular Uzbek intelligentsia. A professor of the history of Uzbekistan and a former teacher of Marxism-Leninism from the Tashkent Institute of Law said he supports the government’s methods of dealing with Islamic opposition and religious groups in general. When asked how he views the government’s actions towards religious activity, he replied: “Some of our people deserve even more harsh treatment, and I teach my students to keep people under tight control when they become prosecutors or judges. We are a modern civilised nation and these barbarians [Islamists] want to turn us back to a medieval society.”¹⁰⁰

Such a viewpoint is not rare among intellectuals who were brought up during the Soviet era with a general view that religion brings darkness, exploitation and backwardness. Rustem Dzhanguzhin, in his analytical work on the political situation in Central Asia, contends that the Uzbek authorities have worked carefully to nurture a public perception that Islam is an ideological enemy of the people.¹⁰¹ This even extends into the realm of popular culture. A recent music video clip by the popular band “Sitora”, entitled Ólma [“Do not die”] was seen by many as being anti-Islamist. The video showed an Uzbek soldier dying to protect a small girl from being kidnapped by a bearded Islamic extremist wearing a Palestinian-style scarf.

State policies directed at assimilating ethnic groups of Muslim origin and forging an homogeneous state, have prompted many Kyrgyz, Tajiks,

Kazakhs and Uyghurs to leave the country. Others who have remained are unhappy with their current social status. There is no evidence that these groups have supported anti-government forces, but the forced acceptance of Uzbek nationality in official records and passports has increased dissatisfaction..

Broad political repression combined with growing poverty has caused unrest in 2001 in Tashkent, Andijan and Jizzakh. Public protests in March and July 2001 were a rare development in Uzbekistan. Women whose husbands had been arrested and imprisoned because of their religious beliefs demonstrated in Andijan and Tashkent. Muzafarmirza Ishakov, the chairman of the Andijan Province branch of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan noted, “the July protests were better organised and showed the women’s determination to continue the struggle.”¹⁰²

Extreme poverty led farmers in the Jizzakh Province to riot in protest at the state’s illegal confiscation of their grain production. One maintained that people had begun demonstrating because they were hungry. She sharply derided the authorities’ seizure of grain crops as fundamentally unfair when farmers did all the work.¹⁰³ The first secretary of the opposition Erk party, Atanazar Aripov, predicts that new protests are likely since the government is poorly positioned to meet the social and economic concerns of the population, but he did not predict “in what form these protests will manifest themselves or be organised.”¹⁰⁴

The death of Shovriq Ruzimorodov, the head of the Qashqa-Darya branch of the HRSU, while in custody in early July 2001 shocked the international community. Human rights activists claim he was tortured to induce a confession — standard practice for Uzbek law-enforcement agencies. As Abdumannob Pólat commented in his newsletter, Ruzimorodov was arrested on 15 June, but authorities did not officially inform his family

⁹⁹ ICG confidential interview

¹⁰⁰ ICG confidential interview

¹⁰¹ Rustem Dzhanguzhin, “Transvaal’, transvaal’, strana moia (k sobytiyam na granitsakh Uzbekistana, Tadzhikistana i iuga Kirgizii) [Transvaal, Transvaal, my country: on the events on the borders of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and the south of Kirghizia],” *Ferghana.ru*, [no date, ca. Sept. 2000], available at: <http://www.ferghana.org/analitics/000.html>.

¹⁰² ICG interview, Andijan, 3 July 2001.

¹⁰³ Chirchik Television broadcast an interview with participants of the 26-27 June strikes on 13 July 2001.

¹⁰⁴ “Banned party activist forecasts further protests in Uzbekistan,” *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 12 July 2001 via BBC Worldwide Monitoring (Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe).

about the arrest or his whereabouts. On 7 July the body was returned to his family.¹⁰⁵

Uzbekistan's relatively rapid population growth is also aggravating social and economic tensions, with potential to accelerate political and economic instability. Current projections suggest the population will double to 50 million by 2050.¹⁰⁶ This comes as the government is already struggling with water shortages, land scarcity and high unemployment. Estimates indicate that between 2000 and 2005, Uzbekistan's working population will grow by 14.5 percent — at a time when there is a surplus of more than 650,000 workers in the agricultural sector, and more than 100,000 in non-agricultural sectors will likely lose their jobs by 2005. Demographers predict that the government will need to provide three million new jobs to maintain employment levels.¹⁰⁷

The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development argued in its Transition Report 2000 that improving living conditions in rural areas through fundamental agricultural reforms will be the key to undercutting the appeal of Islamic groups and maintaining political stability.¹⁰⁸ Few such reforms have been initiated to date. Radical Islamists continue to find broad understanding in localities with deteriorating economic conditions and high unemployment.¹⁰⁹ The Ferghana Valley, which has the highest population density in Central Asia, is a vivid example of how unfulfilled expectations and lack of economic opportunity can spark violent resentment against the government.

The drug trade also presents a growing problem for Uzbekistan. One of the biggest areas of activity for organised crime has been drug production and trafficking from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe. While less involved in drug transit operations than

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan faces the growth of illicit drug trade and narcotics-related crimes. The official Uzbek newspaper, *Narodnoe slovo*, reported that drug-associated crime is on the rise in western Kharazm Province despite measures taken by law-enforcement agencies. According to official estimates, the police registered more than double the number of drug related crimes in the 1999-2000 period than during the 1995-1998 period. Even then the chief prosecutor of Kharazm Province admitted, "these figures do not reveal the full picture of crimes related to narcotics." The prosecutor also admitted that in 2000 five police officers were arrested for involvement in narcotics trafficking.¹¹⁰ According to the 2000 Human Development Report, the highest rates of drug use were observed in Tashkent, Kharazm, Samarqand, Bukhara and Navoiy provinces. The report also forecast a further increase of narcotic addiction and use,¹¹¹ a reality likely to spur increasing rates of HIV/AIDS in Uzbekistan.

¹⁰⁵ Abdumannob Polat, "Uzbek human rights defender died in jail" [report distributed via e-mail], 7 July 2001.

¹⁰⁶ "Deserts expanding in Central Asia, water resources decreasing," *Tashkentskaia pravda* (Tashkent), 27 December 2000. According to this article, glaciologists forecast the decrease of water resources in Uzbekistan by 30 per cent by the year 2020.

¹⁰⁷ *Uzbekistan: Human Development Report 2000*, p. 34.

¹⁰⁸ European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, "Transition Report 2000: Employment, Skills and Transition" (London: ADB, 2000), p. 226.

¹⁰⁹ See "Incubators of Conflict: Central Asia's Localised Poverty and Social Unrest," ICG Asia Report, No. 16, 8 June 2001.

¹¹⁰ "Chuma XXI veka dolzhna byt' ostanovlena [The plague of the 21st century must be stopped]," *Narodnoe slovo*, 26 May 2001, p. 2.

¹¹¹ *Uzbekistan Human Development Report 2000*, p. 12.

V. EXTERNAL FORCES

Several external factors have influenced strongly the political and economic events in Uzbekistan since independence. The most important — both in terms of driving policy in Tashkent and shaping the international community's stance — has been the emergence of the Taliban in 1994 and its subsequent military victories in much of Afghanistan. The Taliban's advances created rare unanimity between Russia, China, Iran, the U.S. and the EU — all of whom fear a potential invasion of Islamic militants in Central Asia that they would view as directly contrary to their security interests. The civil war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1997 further heightened concerns about Islamist extremism in the region. In Beijing, Moscow, Washington and Brussels, combating this extremism was identified as the top priority in Central Asia.

Thus it came as no surprise that Uzbekistan's repeated declarations that it would serve as a bulwark against Islamic expansion met much international approval. Tashkent effectively played upon these security concerns to limit international condemnation of its increasingly authoritarian regime. In 1995 and 1996, the Central Asia policy of most Western states shifted noticeably toward a focus on security assistance to block Islamic militants, drugs and general instability and away from promoting meaningful political and economic reforms. The international community embraced "stability at any cost" even as repression in Uzbekistan escalated to one-time Soviet levels.

Some experts, often citing Uzbekistan to bolster their arguments, claimed that dictatorships would be more stable than democracies in Central Asia. Unfortunately, this was taken seriously by many policy-makers outside the region.¹¹² However, the 1999 Tashkent bombings and IMU incursions in 1999 and 2000 tore apart this theory. Tacit and explicit Western support for President Karimov's authoritarian regime, including direct security assistance, has essentially sanctioned a brutal crackdown on any form of opposition, severe violations of human rights, a sweeping official

anti-Islamic campaign and the establishment of a militarised state often at odds with its neighbours. There is growing evidence that the international community's approach is backfiring as more and more Uzbeks join the IMU and other Islamic organisations because they lack avenues for legitimate expressions of political and religious differences. In placing a premium on "stability" over economic reform, pluralism and human rights, the great powers are sowing the seeds for long-term disaster in Central Asia.

During President Karimov's visit to Moscow on 3-5 May 2001, security cooperation was a major topic. Karimov's increased warmth toward Moscow was widely viewed as driven by lack of confidence in his government's ability to stop Islamic guerrillas — who many anticipate will invade Uzbekistan and/or Kyrgyzstan again this summer. However, locals in both southern Kyrgyzstan and Tashkent speculate that the continued Taliban attacks against the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan may have diverted some IMU fighters from launching new incursions for the time being, although Taliban-IMU links are difficult to explore fully. The new approach to Moscow has raised eyebrows in Tashkent. "For most of our independent history Uzbekistan has been distancing itself from Russia, and now when the government has no confidence in its own capabilities to protect the country, this visit is a vivid indication of serious concerns about forthcoming threat for regime, and overall, stability in Uzbekistan," said a senior academic in Tashkent.¹¹³

However, the answers to Tashkent's security problems are not to be found in Moscow. Russia can bolster Uzbekistan's military and provide ideological support for the suppression of Islamic elements. Military technology, however, is expensive, even from Russia, and inevitably reduces investment in the job creation and other areas needed to head off growing discontent. The most serious potential sources of instability in Uzbekistan are among the discontented masses and those who have lost out in Karimov's internal consolidation of power.

The Russian leadership continues to cultivate the notion of an international Islamic extremist

¹¹² See, for example, Boris Rumer and Stanislav Zhukov eds., *Central Asia: The Challenges of Independence* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), p. 9.

¹¹³ ICG confidential interview

conspiracy both to justify its military campaign in Chechnya and to pull the former Soviet republics of Central Asia back into the Russian political orbit. Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia has shown renewed interest in Central Asia. Indeed, one of Putin's first trips was to Uzbekistan. Some local and Russian journalists have speculated that President Karimov requested Russian military support if the fight against Islamists erupts into a full-blown civil war.¹¹⁴ A Moscow-based journalist working in Uzbekistan comments, "Karimov understands that a couple of thousand IMU guerrillas cannot seize Tashkent, but he feels that broad dissatisfaction with his regime leads to a wide public support for those who call for the overthrow of the president's regime and such a scenario threatens Russia."¹¹⁵ Uzbekistan's increasingly close ties with Russia spark fears among neighbours that Russia may ignore their interests in order to establish a strategic partnership with Tashkent. Uzbekistan's persistent bullying of its fellow Central Asian states has sharply eroded the prospects for regional trade and other cooperation, needlessly increasing tensions and creating concerns that President Karimov might lash out at his neighbours to strengthen his position within Uzbekistan.

VI. CONCLUSION

A. GOVERNMENT OF UZBEKISTAN

Uzbekistan's tenth anniversary will be a sombre affair for many of its citizens who now find their lot not appreciably better than during the Soviet period. Economic and political reform have largely been still-born under President Karimov. The international community has all too often quietly ignored human rights and political abuses within the country. The government of President Karimov must end its strategy of preserving power through authoritarianism and begin to meet the growing social needs of Uzbekistan's population. The continuing expansion of the security services will only further polarise relations between the state and public and sap funding much needed for development. Security arrangements — no matter how extensive or draconian — cannot protect the regime if other problems are left unaddressed.

First and foremost, Uzbekistan must allow a legitimate political opposition. Continuance of essentially single-party rule will only result in disaster for the nation and the region. There is no justification for continuing monopolisation of power in the hands of a narrow elite dominated by Soviet-era bureaucrats. The government should immediately register the Birlik People's Movement and the Erk Democratic Party as a first step toward democratisation that will likely reduce, not increase, tensions within society. The leadership of these secular parties is interested in safeguarding stability as much as the Uzbek government, and joint efforts will better serve this shared goal. Political plurality is the only way eventually to adjudicate the nation's competing regional, ethnic and patronage group interests.

The government must stop demonising even moderate forms of Islamic observance. Uzbekistan's brief independent history starkly highlights how unwise it is to force religious practitioners to become extremists simply to survive. Currently, the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the National Security Service can target anyone affiliated with Islam as part of the government-sponsored campaign of revealing "potential extremists." The constitutional right to practice religion in private and public, freely and without interference, should be upheld. The

¹¹⁴ ICG's interviews, Tashkent, Namangan, Andijan, Ferghana, June-July 2001.

¹¹⁵ ICG confidential interview.

constitutionally mandated separation of state and religion also must be respected, and the practice of designating state-sponsored Imams and Moslem ideology discontinued. Uzbekistan should not deceive itself into believing that “order” can solely be preserved by force.

Uzbekistan should begin to observe the strict separation and equality of the executive, judicial and legislative branches declared by its constitution. A system of checks-and-balances would provide the fundamental underpinning for a functioning democracy, promotion of the rule of law and a modern economy. It would also offer much needed stability that is lacking in the current political environment. The concentration of disproportionate authority in Uzbekistan’s executive has badly distorted the political landscape, led to mounting social tensions, and resulted frequently in rule by fiat.

Wide and systematic improvements in the human rights environment are needed. The continuing pattern of extra-legal detentions, censorship, pervasive repression of civic groups, and frequent use of violence, torture and intimidation must be discontinued. Harassment of independent and opposition journalists practised by security services must be punished. While the president has frequently called for more active involvement by journalists in the social and political life of Uzbekistan, these pleas have more often than not been followed by attacks against independent news outlets and reporters. Trying to eliminate all government criticism from reporting is simply not consistent with a modern state. The government should allow the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan and the Independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan to register as non-government organisations, and the security community should be directed to desist from intimidating their staff. On the basis of recommendations of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, the Independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and other international human rights organisations, Uzbekistan should develop a national plan to combat unlawful practices by law-enforcement agencies. Further, the nationally televised show trials of “anti-state” activists should be stopped.

Uzbekistan’s confrontational approach to its neighbours is also counterproductive. Restrictions

on cross-border trade and travel should be eased. The artificial separation of traditional cultural, trade and kinship ties continues to erode economic and political conditions in border areas, particularly the Ferghana Valley. Stronger economic and cultural ties across borders only makes common sense in a region that desperately needs to generate more rapid economic growth and has limited access to other markets. Ethnic minorities living in Uzbekistan, particularly those residing in border areas, should not be antagonised. Deportation, for example, of ethnic Tajiks from the Uzbek-Tajik border area in the Surkhan-Darya Province, has only increased tensions without improving security. Similarly, the government’s practice of isolating ethnic Uzbek minorities in neighbouring states, largely to exert pressure on those countries, should be discontinued.

B. THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

One of the most important — and difficult — problems that the international community faces from time to time is acknowledging that policy on a given issue has failed. Such a time has now arrived for the international community in Uzbekistan: ten years of giving the government of President Karimov liberty to repress its own citizens, engage in systematic corruption and consolidate a totalitarian state simply have not advanced the practical goal of promoting greater regional stability. Indeed, the Karimov regime’s abusive behaviour is now directly undermining regional stability by fuelling support for armed Islamic extremism and producing severe economic dislocation and growing tensions with neighbouring states. It has become evident that without international pressure no genuine democratisation will take place in Uzbekistan. Particularly the European Union and the United States must establish clear policies toward Uzbekistan designed directly to strengthen a pluralistic political system as a necessary condition for stability. Only unambiguous indications that international assistance will be predicated on political liberalisation will encourage the government of Uzbekistan to reconsider its repressive tactics.

Taking into account the increase of human rights violations, the U.S. government should withhold security assistance under the Cooperative Threat program, which requires the recipient country to

fulfil its obligations under international human rights law. The U.S. government should make clear that unless Uzbekistan takes practical steps to cease use of beatings, suffocation, electric shock, sexual abuse and other forms of torture against political prisoners, assistance will be terminated. Similarly, under the Leahy Amendment to the Foreign Operations Assistance Act, the U.S. should reconsider all military and technical assistance to the Uzbekistan government, whose various security services are responsible for gross violations of human rights.

Across the board, international lending organisations and donor countries should re-examine non-humanitarian assistance to Uzbekistan. The World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Asian Development Bank and other financial institutions should condition their financial assistance on the government's performance in regards to economic reform, allowing greater freedom for civil society, and improvements in human rights and democracy. Uzbekistan needs to realise that fostering democracy is a key to mutually beneficial long-term cooperation with international financial organisations. The government's compliance with the international standards established by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief should be a precondition for financial assistance.

Western governments and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe and other international organisations should demand that the government of Uzbekistan allow the registration of legitimate opposition parties. While the Erk party and Birlik movement have a legal right to be registered under Uzbek law, the government has persistently blocked attempts by these organisations to operate in the country. Official statements that the opposition can return home and work for the fatherland must be more than promises made on paper. Likewise, Europe, the U.S. and international organisations should put pressure on the Karimov government to register the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan and the Independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan as non-governmental organisations and to investigate the case of the head of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan's Qashqa-Darya

Province office, Shovriq Ruzimorodov, who was detained by police and died in custody. Uzbekistan should be given a clear signal that torture and inhuman treatment of suspects while in custody will not be tolerated. Investigation of this case would be an important step toward reversing the deterioration in human rights conditions. The international community should also press the Uzbek government to revisit four Tashkent District court verdicts delivered in June 2001 that resulted, despite little evidence, in the imprisonment of 73 ethnic Tajiks from Surkhan-Darya Province of Uzbekistan for alleged collaboration with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

The international community needs to do a far better job of differentiating between respective elements of the Islamic faith. Support for secular dictatorships only antagonises Muslim communities in Central Asia and encourages more extreme and violent forms of political and religious organisation. The misperception that all forms of Islam threaten Western civilisation has precluded policy-makers from dealing with the root causes of potential instability and conflict in Uzbekistan. Islam is not a monolithic religion, and it reflects local cultures. The fear of expansion by the Taliban should not cause the international community to support policies that drive Central Asia's most pivotal state into extended crisis and conflict.

Accordingly, the U.S. government, in keeping with the International Religious Freedom Act, should condition the future of the U.S.-Uzbekistan Joint Commission on Uzbekistan's efforts to combat human rights abuses based on the religious convictions of citizens. Likewise, the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) should actively engage Uzbekistan and other Central Asian states politically and economically to promote tolerance of Islam. Protection of human rights should become an important function of the organisation. Severe violations of personal freedoms in Uzbekistan should be discussed at the next meeting of heads of member-states of OIC.

Uzbekistan, indeed Central Asia, stands on an important threshold. If it and the international community fail to act with foresight during this critical period, we may well all reap a bitter harvest of instability and conflict for years to come.

Osh/Brussels, 21August 2001

APPENDIX A

GENERAL INFORMATION ON UZBEKISTAN

INTRODUCTION

Background: Russia conquered Uzbekistan in the late 19th century. Stiff resistance to the Red Army after World War I was eventually suppressed and a socialist republic set up in 1925. During the Soviet era, intensive production of "white gold" (cotton) and grain led to overuse of agrochemicals and the depletion of water supplies, which have left the land poisoned and the Aral Sea and certain rivers half dry. Independent since 1991, the country seeks to gradually lessen its dependence on agriculture while developing its mineral and petroleum reserves. Current concerns include terrorism by Islamic militant groups from Tajikistan and Afghanistan, a non-convertible currency, and the curtailment of human rights and democratisation.

GEOGRAPHY

Area:

total: 447,400 sq km

land: 425,400 sq km

water: 22,000 sq km

Area - comparative:

slightly larger than California

Land boundaries:

total: 6,221 km

border countries: Afghanistan 137 km, Kazakhstan 2,203 km, Kyrgyzstan 1,099 km, Tajikistan 1,161 km, Turkmenistan 1,621 km

Coastline: 0 km (Uzbekistan includes the southern portion of the Aral Sea with a 420 km shoreline)

Climate: mostly mid-latitude desert, long, hot summers, mild winters; semiarid grassland in east

Terrain: mostly flat-to-rolling sandy desert with dunes; broad, flat intensely irrigated river valleys along course of Amu Darya, Sir Darya, and Zarafshan; Ferghana Valley in east surrounded by mountainous Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan; shrinking Aral Sea in west

Natural resources: natural gas, petroleum, coal, gold, uranium, silver, copper, lead and zinc, tungsten, molybdenum

Land use:

arable land: 9%

permanent crops: 1%

permanent pastures: 46%

forests and woodland: 3%

other: 41% (1993 est.)

Irrigated land: 40,000 sq km (1993 est.)

Environment - current issues: drying up of the Aral Sea is resulting in growing concentrations of chemical pesticides and natural salts; these substances are then blown from the increasingly exposed lake bed and contribute to desertification; water pollution from industrial wastes and the heavy use of fertilizers and pesticides is the cause of many human health disorders; increasing soil salination; soil contamination from agricultural chemicals, including DDT

PEOPLE

Population: 24,755,519 (July 2000 est.)

Age structure:

0-14 years: 37% (male 4,673,501; female 4,520,471)

15-64 years: 58% (male 7,140,215; female 7,283,143)

65 years and over: 5% (male 452,480; female 685,709) (2000 est.)

Population growth rate: 1.6% (2000 est.)

Birth rate: 26.18 births/1,000 population (2000 est.)

Death rate: 8.02 deaths/1,000 population (2000 est.)

Net migration rate: -2.18 migrant(s)/1,000 population (2000 est.)

Infant mortality rate: 72.13 deaths/1,000 live births (2000 est.)

Life expectancy at birth:

total population: 63.71 years

male: 60.09 years

female: 67.52 years (2000 est.)

Total fertility rate: 3.09 children born/woman (2000 est.)

Ethnic groups: Uzbek 80%, Russian 5.5%, Tajik 5%, Kazakh 3%, Karakalpak 2.5%, Tatar 1.5%, other 2.5% (1996 est.)

Religions: Muslim 88% (mostly Sunnis), Eastern Orthodox 9%, other 3%

Languages: Uzbek 74.3%, Russian 14.2%, Tajik 4.4%, other 7.1%

GOVERNMENT

Independence: 31 August 1991 (from Soviet Union)

National holiday: Independence Day, 1 September (1991)

Constitution: new constitution adopted 8 December 1992

Legal system: evolution of Soviet civil law; still lacks independent judicial system

Suffrage: 18 years of age; universal

Executive branch:

chief of state: President Islam KARIMOV (since 24 March 1990, when he was elected president by the then Supreme Soviet)

head of government: Prime Minister Ótkir SULTANOV (since 21 December 1995) and 10 deputy prime ministers

cabinet: Cabinet of Ministers appointed by the president with approval of the Supreme Assembly

elections: president elected by popular vote for a five-year term; election last held 9 January 2000 (next to be held NA January 2005); note - extension of President KARIMOV's original term for an additional five years overwhelmingly approved - 99.6% of total vote in favor - by national referendum held 26 March 1995); prime minister and deputy ministers appointed by the president

election results: Islam KARIMOV reelected president; percent of vote - Islam KARIMOV 91.9%, Abdulkhafiz JALALOV 4.2%

Legislative branch: unicameral Supreme Assembly or Oliy Majlis (250 seats; members elected by popular vote to serve five-year terms)

elections: last held 5 December 1999 (next to be held NA December 2004)

Judicial branch: Supreme Court, judges are nominated by the president and confirmed by the Supreme Assembly

Political parties and leaders: Adolat ["Justice"] Social Democratic Party (Turghunpólat

DAMINOV, first secretary); Milliy Tiklanish Demokratik ["National Rebirth Democratic"] Party (Ibrahim GHAFUROV, chairman); Vatan Taraqqiyati ["Fatherland Progress"] Party (Anvar YÓLDASHEV, chairman); Khalq Demokratik ["People's Democratic"] Party (formerly Communist Party) (Abdulkhafiz JALALOV, first secretary); Fidokorlar ["Self-Sacrificers"] Party (Erkin NORBOTAEV, general secretary)

Political pressure groups and leaders: Birlik ["Unity"] Movement (Abdurahim PÓLAT (Pulatov), chairman), not currently registered; Erk ["Freedom"] Democratic Party (Muhammad SALIH, chairman) was banned 9 December 1992; Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan [Abdumannob PÓLAT (Pulatov), chairman]; Independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan [Mikhail ARDZINOV, chairman]

ECONOMY

Economy - overview: Uzbekistan is a dry, landlocked country of which 10% consists of intensely cultivated, irrigated river valleys. It was one of the poorest areas of the former Soviet Union with more than 60% of its population living in densely populated rural communities. Uzbekistan is now the world's third largest cotton exporter, a major producer of gold and natural gas, and a regionally significant producer of chemicals and machinery. Following independence in December 1991, the government sought to prop up its Soviet-style command economy with subsidies and tight controls on production and prices. Faced with high rates of inflation, however, the government began to reform in mid-1994, by introducing tighter monetary policies, expanding privatisation, slightly reducing the role of the state in the economy, and improving the environment for foreign investors. The state continues to be a dominating influence in the economy, and reforms have so far failed to bring about much-needed structural changes. The IMF suspended Uzbekistan's \$185 million standby arrangement in late 1996 because of governmental steps that made impossible fulfilment of Fund conditions. Uzbekistan has responded to the negative external conditions generated by the Asian and Russian financial crises by tightening export and currency controls within its already largely closed economy. Economic policies that have repelled foreign investment are a major factor in the economy's stagnation. A growing debt

burden, persistent inflation, and a poor business climate cloud growth prospects in 2000.

GDP: purchasing power parity - \$59.3 billion (1999 est.)

GDP - real growth rate: -1% (1999 est.)

GDP - per capita: purchasing power parity - \$2,500 (1999 est.)

Inflation rate (consumer prices): 29% (1999 est.)¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Source: *CIA: The World Factbook 2000* – Uzbekistan [with minor corrections], available at: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/uz.html>

APPENDIX B

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

HRSU	Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan
IHRSU	Independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IRP	Islamic Renaissance Party
NSS	National Security Service
ODIHR	Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights
OIC	Organisation of the Islamic Conference
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PDPU	People's Democratic Party of Uzbekistan
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

APPENDIX C

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (ICG) is a private, multinational organisation committed to strengthening the capacity of the international community to anticipate, understand and act to prevent and contain conflict.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts, based on the ground in countries at risk of conflict, gather information from a wide range of sources, assess local conditions and produce regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers.

ICG's reports are distributed widely to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made generally available at the same time via the organisation's internet site, www.crisisweb.org. ICG works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analysis and to generate support for its policy prescriptions. The ICG Board - which includes figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media - is directly involved in helping to bring ICG reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. ICG is chaired by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari; former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans has been President and Chief Executive since January 2000.

ICG's international headquarters are at Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC, New York and Paris. The organisation currently operates field projects in nineteen crisis-affected countries and regions across four continents: Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia in Europe; Algeria, Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Zimbabwe in Africa; Burma/Myanmar, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in Asia; and Colombia in Latin America.

ICG raises funds from governments, charitable foundations, companies and individual donors. The following governments currently provide funding: Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France,

Germany, Ireland, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, the Republic of China (Taiwan), Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Foundation and private sector donors include the Ansary Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Open Society Institute, the Ploughshares Fund, the Sasakawa Foundation, the Smith Richardson Foundation, the Ford Foundation and the U.S. Institute of Peace.

August 2001

APPENDIX D

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